

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a green medieval-style tunic with a black corset and a black belt, stands in a field of yellow flowers. She is holding a dagger in her right hand. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a sunset sky.

# Sage

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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O'DONNELL

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Free Sneak Preview of Raven - Book 2 in Beauties with Blades

Enjoy This Book? I Could Use Your Help

Sage

Beauties with Blades™ - Book One

by

Laurel O'Donnell

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The characters and events portrayed in this romance novella are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Dearest Reader,

Thank you for reading *Sage*!

In the medieval ages, Latin was the primary written language. Since this book centers around reading and writing, I have taken creative license and used the modern alphabet in place of Latin. In doing this, I hope to simplify the coded manuscript for your reading enjoyment. So please suspend your disbelief for a short while and join me on Sage's adventure.

Welcome to my world!

*Laurel*

# Prologue

1294

*Chateau le Bezu, France*

**“Remember what I taught you,”** a soft voice echoed through the cavernous room. Sage Hawke leaned over the wooden desk to be closer to the old book. Flickering flames from the torch ensconced on the wall behind her cast light over the thick parchment pages.

She traced one of the swirling letters, awed by its beauty. She knew that together the letters formed words, but she didn't recognize any of them. Her brow furrowed in frustration.

Brother Nicolas sat in a rickety chair beside her. His long, brown monk's robe was as worn and comfortable as an old blanket. Books were piled around them, stacked in rows against the stone walls.

What he taught her, Sage's mind repeated. And then, like a lifting fog, the letters came into focus. *The*. She knew that word! “The,” she exclaimed proudly, pointing to the word on the page. She looked at Brother Nicolas, beaming in victory.

He nodded, his wrinkled cheeks curved in a smile of satisfaction. “That's right.”

Sage turned back to the book with newfound confidence. “I can read!”

Brother Nicolas chuckled softly. “You recognized one word. That is not reading. But it certainly is a start.”

“Sage!” her sister's voice called firmly from the doorway.

Sage glanced over her shoulder at Raven. Her sister's black hair hung in waves about her shoulders like dark clouds. Raven was nine summers, only two years older than Sage, but thought she was in charge.

“Father's waiting,” Raven said impatiently.

Sage knew he was, but she didn't want to leave. She wanted to look at the books. She wanted to learn to read.

“You're going to get into trouble,” Raven warned.

Sage scowled desperately at Raven and then glanced back at the letters filling the parchment pages. “Just one more moment,” she pleaded. She poked her nose closer to the pages, longing to decipher

one more word.

Raven left the room.

“Sage,” Brother Nicolas murmured patiently. “Your father wants to leave.”

Sage sighed, frustrated. She knew it was time to go. But she needed one more minute, one more second, to figure out another word.

“You can come back another time. I will gladly teach you more,” he said kindly.

She studied him with anguish. “What if you are not here when we come back? What if you are gone?” Her lower lip pouted. “Like Mother?”

“Sage.” Brother Nicolas reached for her sympathetically, but she squirmed out of his grasp. “We all die, my dear.”

“But Mother left us,” Sage said, puckering her face in disapproval and crossing her arms.

“She was very sick. She would have stayed with you if she could have. She loved you very much.”

Sage’s lower lip puffed out farther, but she faced him. “What if you get sick? What if you are gone when I come back?”

Brother Nicolas sighed. “If I am gone when you return, I’m certain the next monk can teach you.”

Her lip quivered, and she gazed desperately at the book. She ran her hand over the animal skin parchment reverently. The letters were so permanent. They were always going to be there.

“Sage,” a deep voice beckoned from the doorway.

Sage glanced up to find a tall, imposing man standing in the doorway. He cast a long shadow into the room. His brow furrowed in displeasure. A day’s growth of beard covered his square jaw. His dark hair hung in thick waves to his strong shoulders. His leather armor fit snugly over his torso and hips, with metal studs lining the edges. A sword was strapped to his waist. She bowed her head.

“It’s time to leave,” he said sternly.

“Yes, Father,” she whispered and turned away from the books. She took a step toward the door but then stopped and faced him with a lifted chin. “I would like to learn to read.”

Raven gasped behind him.

Her father scowled in confusion. “Read? You have no need to read. All that you need in life is a strong blade for protection. That will get you further than reading.”

Sage felt tears rising inside her. She loved the books—the feel of the leather cover, the parchment pages. But mostly, she loved the longevity of the works. They would not leave her. But even more appealing was the secrets they held. She loved decoding the puzzles that reading offered her. It was more important than sword skills.

“Come,” he commanded.

Sage cast one last glance at Brother Nicolas. Compassion shone from his old eyes, and his lips thinned in resolution. He gently closed the book she had been looking at.

He wasn’t going to help her.

She turned and moved to her father’s side, downcast. He was her family, and his word was law. “Yes, Father.”



# Chapter 1

*October 5, 1307*

*France*

The air in the main room of the inn was tense, filled with expectation. The scent of body odor and cooked duck permeated the space. Five men leaned forward over one of the wooden tables in the center of the room; their gazes focused like pinpoints on the hand holding the dice. Two of the men were farmers, two were travelers, and the last was the toothless innkeeper who sat atop a wobbly chair.

Sage Hawke shook her hand, making the dice she held clink together. Her analytical mind had already worked out all possibilities of the die roll. They had been playing for three rounds. There was no way she was losing this round; the odds were in her favor. She glanced across the room where her oldest sister, Raven, sat alone, quietly drinking ale and observing, her eyes casually shifting from person to person. Her dark hair was plaited into a braid, and she wore leather armor and a sword strapped to her waist.

Sage held the die for a moment longer to build anticipation, her gaze traveling from one man to the next. Then, she let the die fly across the table. The square cubes rolled, clunking on the wooden tabletop as they tumbled.

The door opened. With a gust of wind, Sage's younger sister, Willow, entered. Some of the male patrons glanced at her. She pushed her blonde braid over her shoulder and walked up to Sage's side.

Sage saw her in her peripheral vision but kept her focus on the die. The blocks slowly came to a halt.

The toothless innkeeper smiled and nodded his head eagerly as the rest of the men groaned and shook their heads, mumbling their disbelief.

Sage reached forward, a grin of triumph on her lips. How foolish these men were. It was almost too easy for her. She wrapped her arms around the coins in the center of the table.

The innkeeper caught her wrist as the men around them dispersed. "My winnings," he reminded her.

"Half of it," she agreed. "The rest is mine." Sage slipped her wrist free of his hold and pulled the coins to her.

He nodded greedily and watched her split the coins.

Sage handed him his winnings.

He smiled a toothless grin at her. "Nice doing business with you." He cast a glance at Willow and stood, moving toward another table.

Sage untied a bag from her belt and opened it, scooping all the coins carefully into the bag. Then, she tied it and attached it to her belt. She glanced over her shoulder at Willow. "You're back early."

Willow had been with Christian Sterling, a family friend of theirs, tending the wounds he had received in a sword fight at the back of the inn.

Willow bent to her and said quietly, "I want you to look at something."

Sage stood, looking at her sister with concern. Willow was beautiful. Tiny blonde curls framed her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were blue and wide and sparkling. The men noticed, and Willow knew they did. She used her beauty to her advantage.

"Are you well?" Sage asked with worry.

Willow nodded and led Sage from the inn. She guided her around the side of the wooden building where moonlight lit up the yard.

"What is it? Did Christian hurt you?" Sage asked, ready to take off his head. Although Christian was a longtime family friend, they hadn't seen him for years until this night.

Willow stopped and whirled. "No! No." She looked one way and then the other, making sure there were no others around. She reached inside her armor and pulled out a pouch. She untied it and removed a small book. It was about the size of her hand.

A book! Shocked and intrigued, Sage hungrily took it. She inspected the little, black leather-bound book, opening it and examining the parchment pages. Books were rare, and it was even rarer for Willow to have one as she had never shown interest in them. "Where did you get this?"

"Christian gave it to me," Willow answered. "Can you read it?"

Sage stopped at a random page and scanned it, longingly drawing her finger over the parchment. How she wished she could read it! She could recognize simple words like "to" and "in." But none of the letters formed any words she knew. She shook her head in frustration. "I can't read. You know that."

"You can read some things. More than me, anyway."

"Nothing like this." She flipped through the parchment pages carefully. It might as well have been in a foreign language. "Why would he give you a book? He knows you can't read."

"He can't read either. Maybe he found no use for it."

Sage lifted her gaze to her, her brow lifting doubtfully. That didn't make sense. Why would he have a book if he had no use for it?

Willow shrugged. "Maybe he knew I'd give it to you."

Sage glanced around, expecting Christian to be hiding somewhere. "Where is he?"

"He left."

"He handed this book to you and left?" Sage asked suspiciously.

Willow nodded.

"Is he coming back?"

Willow half shrugged. "I don't think so. I mean...I really have no way of knowing. He didn't say he was."

Sage stared at Willow for a long moment. Something was suspicious. Why would Christian give Willow a book? It would mean nothing to her. But it meant the world to Sage. The book beckoned to her, and she looked at it again.

"We should probably figure out what it says. Do you know anyone who can read the book?" Willow asked.

Sage looked down at the letters on the parchment page. Already, her mind was trying to solve the puzzle, to sound out some of the words. "Possibly. Remember Brother Nicolas from Chateau le Bezu?"

Willow shook her head.

"It was a long time ago, and you were young. Chateau le Bezu is only half a day's ride from here. Father is working on a job and won't be back until sunset tomorrow." She stroked the black leather book admiringly. "We could be back before sunset, and he would never know."

Willow was silent for a long moment.

The silence stretched until Sage looked up at her.

"Father will not be pleased if he finds out," Willow said carefully.

Sage's lip curved up into a grin. "We'll have to make sure he doesn't find out."

"What about Raven?"

Sage bit her lower lip as she considered what to do about Raven. Her older sister was a stickler for rules. Raven always followed their father's orders. Sage shook her head. "She won't like it."

"No," Willow agreed. "And we shouldn't tell her about Christian. She won't approve. She never liked him. We can tell her I found the book."

"Good idea." Sage agreed and looked down at the book. She eased it closed and put her hand protectively over the cover. "We could go without her and—"

Willow shook her head, frowning in disapproval. "We *have* to tell her. She'll want to come with us."



"No. Absolutely not," Raven said, crossing her arms as she stood outside the inn, facing her sisters. "Father wouldn't want us traveling the roads without him." Raven stalked across the yard toward the wooden stables. Her black braid swung back and forth behind her as she moved as if it were a finger wagging negatively.

"He doesn't have to know," Willow pleaded, following her across the yard.

Sage reluctantly trailed, holding the book to her chest. She had known Raven would react like this. As the oldest of the sisters, Raven had always been second in charge, behind their father. Raven was used to Sage and Willow following orders.

Raven whirled on Willow. "Don't you think Sybil will tell him we didn't help her with the harvest and that we were missing for an entire day?"

Willow cast an imploring glance at Sage for help.

"We'll make something up," Sage told her. "That we were out hunting."

"All day?" Raven asked in disbelief. She put a hand on her hip. "And what do we say when we come back with nothing?"

"We didn't find anything," Willow added to the story.

Raven's eyes narrowed. "And you think Father will believe that?"

No. Sage knew Father would never believe that. Raven was an excellent hunter. Still, Sage was not put off. She had the answer. They just needed to tell their father what he would believe. "We got distracted practicing."

Willow nodded enthusiastically, grinning. "We could stay an extra day and help Sybil with the harvest. It will work! Please, Raven."

Raven shook her head. Her dark eyes pinned Willow. "Why is this so important to you?" she demanded. She jerked her head at Sage. "I can see Sage being so adamant, but you? You want us to ride an entire day for some old monk to read a book? You've never cared about a book before. What do you think it's going to say?"

Sage had been asking herself the same questions. She knew Willow secretly harbored feelings for Christian, but she wasn't sure that was the cause of Willow's interest. There was something Willow was not telling them. But Sage didn't care. It was nice to have one of her sisters as interested in a book as she was.

"I don't know," Willow admitted. "But aren't you curious?"

"No," Raven insisted. "I don't care about a book. I'd rather be practicing. Or doing something that will help me hone my skills. And

you should, too." She looked at Sage. "*Both* of you."

Raven was so much like their father. Sometimes, it boiled Sage's blood. "Books are important," Sage asserted. "They hold knowledge, and knowledge is power."

"I don't want that kind of power. It's dangerous."

"That's Father talking." Sage lifted her chin and ran a hand over the black leather of the book. Raven would never understand books. Not the way Sage did. They held knowledge; they held secrets. "I want to know what it says. And I'm going to let Bezu know whether you come or not."

Willow gaped in disbelief.

Raven's lips thinned, and her eyes narrowed. "I'll tell Father."

"I don't care. I'm going." She brushed past Raven and marched toward the stables. "You do what you have to."

Willow stood indecisively for a long moment. Then, with a small sigh, she hurried after Sage.

Raven cursed quietly and followed them into the stables. "This is not a good idea."

The three girls moved to the stall where their horses were stabled.

Sage smiled to herself. Victory. She had always allowed Raven to lead, never standing up to her. It felt good to take charge for once.

Willow met Sage's gaze over the back of her horse, grinning widely. "When has anything worthwhile been a good idea?"

## Chapter 2

**T**he Hawke sisters had been traveling most of the night. Sage had risen Willow the book back, and her fingers itched to hold it again. To look at it. To turn each parchment page over carefully. What did the words inside reveal? What knowledge could she learn from having it read to her?

She led the way on horseback down the road toward the chateau, excitement churning inside of her.

“We should rest,” Raven called.

Reluctantly, Sage agreed. Her bottom was numb from riding for so long. She guided them to the side of the road, where a hill spread upwards to their right and flat land to their left. No place for robbers to hide. She wasn’t afraid of robbers or brigands; like her sisters, she was skilled at sword fighting. She just didn’t want to be delayed getting to the chateau.

They dismounted. Sage ran her hand over her steed’s bottom, and Achilles nickered and tossed his brown head. He was likely as tired as she was but not nearly as eager. She moved to his head and checked the bridle and reins.

Willow arched her stiff back before heading for the side of the road.

Raven bent over, stretching out her tired muscles.

When Sage was done inspecting Achilles, she heard the rustling of pages and glanced at Willow. Her sister sat cross-legged on the ground, holding the book and flipping through the pages. Sage approached her. She sat beside her and bumped her shoulder into Willow’s to get her attention. “Trying to read it?” she teased.

“I think I’ll leave that to Brother Nicolas. Or you. You’ve always wanted to read.”

Sage sighed. “I wish someone would teach me.”

Willow nodded and continued to turn the thick pages.

“Does it have pictures?” Raven asked, joining them. She stood over them, gazing down at the book.

“No,” Sage answered. “That’s why we’re taking it to Brother Nicolas. He can read it.”

“What do you expect to find?”

Sage shrugged. Just having a book was a treasure to her. A mystery. A puzzle. She was hoping that if Brother Nicolas read it, she

could learn some of the words in it.

"The secret to the universe?" Raven mocked. "The fountain of youth?"

Sage rose quickly, annoyed. "You know it's not always about gold and riches. What if it tells you a secret fighting method? A forgotten way to fight and win."

"What would I do with that? I already know how to fight."

"You can always be better," Sage snapped and stalked away from her to her horse. Raven never understood her hunger for knowledge. She and her father weren't like her. They didn't have a mind like hers. She saw things differently than they did. She wanted to know why, and they were content never to wonder.



They arrived at the chateau by mid-morning and were escorted to Brother Nicolas in the keep's catacombs. He was an old man, with hardly any hair on his head and weathered, wrinkled skin. His back was hunched beneath the brown monk's robe he wore.

As they entered his chambers, he rose slowly and crossed the room to greet each of them with hearty embraces as if they were longtime friends.

In truth, Sage barely remembered him. She felt uneasy as she stood in his hug. He clung to her as he finished, using her shoulder as a brace to return to his chair behind a wooden desk. He sat down with a heavy sigh.

His blue eyes were wise, and intelligence radiated from them. The corners of his lips had deep laughter lines. His skin sagged around his chin, and strands of long white hair popped up from an otherwise smooth head. "It's so good to see you girls, although I would never have recognized you."

Sage glanced uncomfortably at Willow. Sage wasn't good at talking to people. Willow was the friendliest out of the three of them.

Willow smiled warmly at Brother Nicolas.

"You were this big," he held out a hand three feet from the floor, "when I last saw you three. And you were a rambunctious lot!" He chuckled.

"How long ago was that?" Willow asked.

He pursed his lips in thought. "Neigh on twelve summers."

"Twelve?" Willow gasped.

About a year after Mother died, Sage thought. Father must have brought them here while he figured out how to care for them. She

couldn't imagine that a chateau of monks would have been much help with caring for three rambunctious girls.

Brother Nicolas nodded. "Of course, you came back for visits. But not often." He gazed at Willow through narrowed eyes of thought. "You must be Willow."

Willow beamed, pleased.

He laughed and swatted at his knee. "I remember those golden ringlets. Cried all night for your father. We didn't know what to do with you! You drove Brother Peter mad."

"She still drives some people mad," Raven muttered.

Sage grinned.

"I'm so pleased you came to visit again," Brother Nicolas said.

Sage glanced at Willow, urging her to show him the book with an insistent nod.

"Well, actually, we came to ask a favor of you." Willow untied the pouch and opened it to remove the book. "We would like you to read this to us." She handed him the book.

Brother Nicolas took the book. He angled it toward the light of the torch ensconced on the wall, studying it for a moment. He opened it and scanned the parchment pages. "Where did you get this?" The merriment had left his voice.

"It was a gift," Willow explained.

"A gift?" Raven echoed, staring at her with a hard look.

Obviously, Willow had forgotten they had told Raven she found it. Sage stepped up to the desk, waiting anxiously to hear him read.

"Hmmm." He turned to the first page, moving forward until his nose all but touched the page. All his good-naturedness evaporated, and a deep frown etched into his weathered forehead. He straightened and leaned toward them. "Who gave you this book, child?" he asked in a soft, almost whispered voice.

"A man," Willow answered evasively.

Raven rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Leave this book with me. No good will befall you if you keep it."

The sisters all looked at one another.

No good would befall them? Sage's curiosity was enflamed. Her insides clenched tightly, and she mentally begged Willow not to leave it. She shook her head slightly.

Willow wondered, "Why do you say that?"

He pointed one of his crooked fingers at the first page, moving from one figure in the text to another. "I've been around for far too long. I've seen every kind of book there is. You can't read this. It is babble."

"Babble?" Sage echoed, frowning in confusion. "Why would someone write a book that you can't read?"



"Oh, you can read it. After you figure out the code."

"Code?" Sage glanced at the book on the desk with a new thrill gripping her.

"It has a hidden code."

"A hidden code?" Raven echoed.

Sage leaned forward eagerly. "Can you decipher it?"

"It will take time," Brother Nicolas admitted. "But I can decipher it."

"Can you teach me?"

"Sage!" Raven objected. "We don't have that much time."

"I would love to teach you," Brother Nicolas said enthusiastically, ignoring Raven's interjection. "It gets lonely down here. I would enjoy the company."

"Sage," Raven said between clenched teeth, grabbing her arm. "Can I talk to you?"

Reluctantly, Sage moved away from the desk and into the corner, out of earshot of Brother Nicolas. Her gaze was pinned on the book on his desk.

Raven followed her. Her black hair slightly swayed as she glanced back at Brother Nicolas and then at Sage. "You can't stay."

"I want to learn," Sage said in a whispered tone, hungrily eyeing the stacks of books around the room.

"The only reason I came is that you said we'd be back to Sybil's farm before Father arrived."

Sage shook her head in denial and glanced at Raven. "You came because we are family."

"Which is even more reason for you to come back with us."

"This is what I've always wanted. To learn. Brother Nicolas can teach me to read. To decipher the hidden code. How can I leave? How can you ask me to?"

Raven glared at Sage. Her mannerisms mirrored Father's when she became angry.

"Tell Father I left on my own accord," Sage suggested.

"He will never believe that. He knows we would never let you go alone."

Sage sighed softly. "Fine. Then go and get him. Bring him back here. I will talk to him when he arrives. I will take full responsibility."

"Sage—"

"I'm not leaving, Raven." She spun and walked back to Brother Nicolas and Willow.

Raven stood stiffly with her hands tightened into balls for a long moment. Finally, she followed Sage angrily. "Sage is staying," Raven announced. "To help Brother Nicolas."

"Father won't mind," Sage told Brother Nicolas, even though she

knew her father would be furious. “Brother Nicolas is a friend.”

“Willow and I will wait for Father’s return at Sybil’s farm. We’ll bring him back here.”

“Bring him back?” Brother Nicolas echoed in confusion. “There’s no need to bring him back. He is already here.”

## Chapter 3

**G**uided by another monk, Willow and Raven left to find Sage remained with Brother Nicolas. She walked about the cave-like room, running her finger over the stacks of books lining the walls, eyeing them with awe. "Where did you get all of these books?"

Brother Nicolas chuckled softly. "Some were donated. Some I've collected. Some were here before I arrived." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at her. "You were the little one who always wanted to know why. A long time ago, I taught you some things before you left. Do you recall?"

Sage spun on him, a fond grin on her lips. "Of course, I remember."

Brother Nicolas nodded and sat back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I remember *everything* you taught me."

"Everything?" Brother Nicolas repeated, amused. His smile faded, and he surveyed her through pensive eyes. "Can you read?"

Sage sighed, and her shoulders drooped. "No. I can sound words out, and I can read two-letter words like 'in' and 'to.'"

"Do you know the alphabet?"

Sage nodded. "Yes."

"Do you remember anything about ciphers?"

Sage cocked her head to the side, trying to remember. "It was so long ago. I remember you telling me about a cipher." She thought about it for a moment. "You said a cipher is a code where each letter has been changed to hide the message."

Brother Nicolas smiled in admiration. "How do you break the code?"

Sage shrugged and walked up to his desk. "It depends what type of code it is."

Brother Nicolas pushed the book across the desk toward her. "Can you read anything in here?"

She stared down at the black leather cover. "No," she answered without touching the book. She had already leafed through the pages and couldn't pick out any words. Not even the simple ones that she knew.

"And why can't you read it?"

She shook her head, frustrated and embarrassed. "Because I can't read."

"But you told me you could read simple words." He tapped the book. "Why can't you read *this* book?"

Sage looked at the book for a moment before picking it up. She opened the book and scanned the letters on the parchment. There were no two-letter words that she recognized. She frowned. "There are no simple words. No 'and' or 'to' or 'at.'"

"Why is that?"

She considered his question. "It's in code," she stated, staring at Brother Nicolas with excitement. "These letters don't form words we know. We have to crack the code to understand the text."

He grinned proudly. "Exactly."

She continued to peruse the parchment page. She rested her bottom on the desk, her back to him. "But what kind of code?"

"That's what we have to decide." He bent and opened a drawer in his desk.

Sage didn't pay attention. The words themselves made no sense. Her gaze settled on a two-letter word. When she tried to sound it out, it wasn't a word. It made no sense. "Here's a two-letter word. If I sound it out, it says 'zoo.' Z and a U."

"It's coded. Those letters are attributed to other letters in the alphabet. We have to figure out what word that is. What two-letter words do you know?"

Sage rolled her eyes. "There are dozens. To. Do. In. It."

Brother Nicolas smiled and picked up a quill. He dipped it into an inkpot and wrote down the alphabet on a blank piece of parchment. "It's trial and error. Figure out what letter the letters correspond to and we figure out the code. Look for single letters. Those might be easier. There are only a few of those. A. I."

Sage flipped through the book. Then she spotted one. "Here." Sage placed the book on the desktop and pointed the word out to Nicolas. "G. It's a G."

"So, G could be code for A or I."

"I see. And that would correlate to all the other G's in the book."

Brother Nicolas nodded in agreement. "Unless we are wrong."

Sage nodded, examining the page. "Unless we are wrong."

"It takes time," he said. "Patience." He dipped the quill into the ink again and wrote down the first line of the book on a blank parchment he had on the desk. Then, he replaced all the G letters with A. "Do you understand what I am doing?"

Sage watched the quill move slowly over the page and nodded.

Brother Nicolas sat back in his chair.

Sage turned the book so she could see it. Her gaze shifted from his

piece of parchment to the book and back. Excitement fizzled through her body, and she could barely keep her toes from tapping.

“Sage,” Brother Nicolas called.

Sage was too busy looking for similar letters on the book’s parchment page. She knew she could do it. Her skin prickled with exuberance. Her mind whirled with possibility at the unfurling of clues. She loved working on puzzles, and this was the biggest and most challenging she had ever faced.

“Sage,” Brother Nicolas called more firmly.

Annoyed, Sage looked up at him.

His gaze was level and intense. “You must not share this information with anyone. Do you understand?”

Every instinct Sage had wanted to return to the puzzle before her, but somewhere deep inside her, Brother Nicolas’s warning stirred apprehension. Her gaze swept his wrinkled face in confusion.

“The information we decode from this book must remain secret. You can’t tell anyone.”

Sage looked down at the book, at the letters, at the parchment pages. Someone had gone through a lot of trouble to keep the message in this book hidden. Still, how could she keep it a secret from her family? From Willow or Raven? Or her father?

“It was coded for a reason,” Brother Nicolas explained seriously. “You may already be in danger. But you must not tell anyone what you discover.”

Sage sighed softly and agreed with a quick nod of understanding so she could return to concentrating on the book.

“That’s a wise warning, Brother Nicolas,” someone called from the doorway.

Sage glanced away from her book to see a monk standing near the entrance of the room. She gauged him with a brief glimpse. A monk. Tall with short blond hair. And then, as if beckoned, she returned her gaze to the book, the letters consuming her complete attention.

A familiar hiss filled the room. Annoying. She didn’t want to take her concentration from the book. But somewhere inside her, alarms flared. She knew that sound. A sword being pulled from its sheath!

Her hand dropped to the pommel of her sword. Too late.

The monk pressed the cold steel tip of his sword to her neck, shaking his head and clucking sympathetically.

She lifted her chin beneath the pressure of the steel. Every reflex she had demanded she protect that book.

Brother Nicolas rose. “Brother Marcus, what is the meaning of this? We are working.”

“I’ll take the book,” Marcus ordered in a soft voice.

Panic flared inside Sage. No! She didn’t budge because of the

sword pressed to her neck. She swiveled her eyes without moving her head to Brother Nicolas but could only see his shadow against the wall.

“The book?” Brother Nicolas asked, confused. “It is meaningless.”

“Then you won’t miss it,” Brother Marcus stated.

“You won’t be able to read it,” Sage said through clenched teeth. “It’s coded.”

One side of his lips turned up in a grin. “That’s why you will be coming with me.”

## Chapter 4

**S**age's stomach dropped, and her world careened on its "No. Let her go," Nicolas commanded from behind her. "She can't read it. She will be of no help to you."

Sage swallowed and shifted her gaze to the empty doorway. Where were her sisters?

Marcus stepped in a semi-circle around Sage, keeping the sword tip to her throat until he was within a hand's grasp of Brother Nicolas's desk...and the book.

He was too close to the book. She had to do something. "What kind of monk has a sword?" she wondered aloud.

"A false one," Brother Nicolas accused.

Marcus reached for the book. Before Marcus could touch it, Nicolas rose and lunged forward, his old fingers stretching for the book. Marcus whirled toward Nicolas, bringing his sword around.

With the sword gone from her throat, Sage backed away and drew her weapon in one fluid movement.

For a moment, no one moved. Nicolas's splayed hand covered the book on the desk. Marcus leaned into Nicolas, and his arm bent with the old monk's weight as Nicolas sagged against him. Marcus had been too quick turning his sword toward Nicolas. The sword had pierced Nicolas's stomach.

Sage stared in horror as she realized what had happened, gasping, "No."

Marcus stepped back, pulling his sword from Nicolas's stomach. "I'm sorry, old friend," he whispered. "But you know how important this is."

Nicolas slumped forward onto the desk and slid into his seat, holding his stomach. A large stain of blood blossomed from beneath his brown robe.

Furious and horrified, Sage raised her blade to strike at Marcus.

In one swift movement, he seized the book and intercepted her blow, locking swords with her. A ting echoed through the small room as the weapons connected.

"Run," Nicolas gasped to Sage as he clutched his stomach.

That was the last thing she planned to do. She had to know why—why Marcus wanted the book so badly, what secrets it held. Her eyes

locked on the leather-bound tome Marcus held in his hand. "Give me the book, and I'll let you live," she stated.

A grin tugged the corners of his lips. "Lower your sword."

Disbelief washed over her. "You have no chance of leaving here alive."

Marcus's eyes narrowed, assessing, and then he sighed. "Put your sword down, or I will destroy this book." He held the book out toward the torch on the wall.

Anxiety speared Sage as he inched the book and all its secrets closer to the flickering flames.

A moment passed and then another.

She couldn't move. If she put her sword down, he would escape with the book. If she didn't, he would burn the book, destroying everything inside.

"He won't. He won't burn the book," Brother Nicolas whispered, his voice resonating throughout the room.

Anguish filled Sage. She couldn't take the chance he would destroy the book. She longed to know what secrets it held. Still, this Marcus had stabbed Brother Nicolas. If she lowered her sword, would she be next? She hesitated.

Marcus edged the parchment pages closer to the hungry flames.

"Wait!" she cried out, desperately.

Marcus halted his movement, gazing at her. He lowered his sword. She quickly matched his movement.

"Give me the book," Sage commanded, holding her palm out.

"I'll give you the book when we are out of here."

"We?" she asked, confused.

"I can't decode it." He sheathed his weapon but still held the book to the torch. "But you can. You *will* come with me."

Sage glanced at Brother Nicolas.

He shook his head, signaling for her not to go.

She might be able to decode the book...if she knew how to read. Her eyes lifted to the book hungrily. She wanted that book. She wanted to learn its mysteries. She wanted to prove to everyone, even herself, that she could break the code. Resolved, she re-sheathed her sword and agreed with a nod.

Marcus grinned again, one side of his lips turning up. He withdrew the book from the flames and tucked it into his robe.

Nicolas lowered his forehead to the desk in defeat.

Marcus moved past Sage to the doorway.

Sage took the parchment page Brother Nicolas had been working on from the desk and tucked it inside her leather armor. She cast one last glance at Nicolas. He was seated, with his head resting on the desk. She wished she could help him, but the red blood dripped



through his fingers. She had seen enough death to know that the wound was severe, and he had no chance of surviving. She regretted bringing the book to him and involving him in all of this. And still, the book beckoned to her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Nicolas before departing the room.

She followed Marcus into the hallway, wondering for a brief moment if she could tackle him and take the book. In the end, she discarded the idea. She didn't want to chance that the book might be torn or damaged in the struggle. She would fight if she had to, but she didn't have to battle him right now. There would be a time, but this was not it.

She glanced toward the stairs. Where were her sisters? If they could get up the stairs, perhaps she would run into them.

Marcus turned to her, his gaze sweeping over her. "Give me your sword sheath."

She straightened in reluctance.

He cocked his head to the side and a grin formed on his lips. "I can't let you keep it."

She ground her teeth and unbuckled the belt. Without her sword around her waist, she suddenly felt vulnerable. She faltered.

He held his hand out.

Was the book worth this? Should she run? Should she make her escape? But she couldn't. She had to have the book. She had to know why. Finally, she slapped the belt into his hand.

He slung it over his shoulder. "This way." He led her down the corridor, deeper into the catacombs and away from the stairs.

"But the exit is that way," Sage said, hesitantly trailing him. Part of her plan had been to get him to try to escape through the main chateau in hope of seeing other monks or, better yet, Raven and Willow.

"There's a better way," he said. And he continued down the hallway.

He didn't even look back to make sure she was close, and this angered Sage. He knew she would follow like a little dog. And, of course, she would. She wanted that book.

They walked down the hallway lit by torches ensconced on the wall, moving past empty rooms carved from the surrounding ground and fortified by stones. The air was muggy and thick here. Sage imagined they were deep underground. Her mind began churning. How could she get the book and escape? Escape? She wasn't a bound prisoner. She could make her escape at any time; it would just be without the book. She would never do that. She couldn't. She didn't want him to have that book. Then, how could she get it?

Finally, he ducked into one of the side rooms. Stacked crates lined

the walls, and a tapestry depicting monks praying to a cross hung on the far side. There was no way out here. Was he going to kill her? She had to be on guard. She didn't think he would kill her, as he'd said he needed her.

Marcus walked over to the tapestry and eased it aside to reveal a grate. He bent over and wrapped his fingers around the metal slats.

Sage scanned the room. A few candles lay atop some of the crates, and a large iron bowl was on another. She could hit him over the head and disable him.

He pulled at the grate and groaned as she inched her way over to the side of the room where the bowl was. She reached out and touched the bowl.

A creaking, squeaking sound echoed through the room as he pulled the grate open.

He stood, grunting as if out of breath, and turned to her, sweeping his hand toward the opening behind the grate. She quickly withdrew her hand from the bowl as he beckoned, "After you."

Sage hesitated for a moment before taking a step forward. If she could buy some time, perhaps Willow or Raven would find them. She pursed her lips and took another footstep. "Let me have the book."

He tilted his head slightly to the side, and his eyes narrowed. "I think it is safe where it is."

She lifted her chin. "Then I won't go with you."

Those cursed lips curled up on one side again. It was a mocking smile. "Very well." He shifted her sword belt on his shoulder and began to duck into the small opening.

"Wait!" Sage called. Damn him. He was so confident. When he reemerged again, she continued, "The sooner I can see the book, the sooner I can decode it."

"You won't be able to see the pages in the dark."

Sage glanced into the blackness of the passageway, still hesitating. Where were her sisters?

"I'll give it to you when we get out of the chateau."

Sage glanced at him, unsure. Was he lying to get her to go with him? She paused at the grate opening, looking into the darkness. The blackness was complete. She glanced at Marcus, searching his face. His jaw was square and clean-shaven. His nose was straight, and his blue eyes gleamed patiently. She clenched her teeth. Was the book worth so much? She could easily escape and race back down the hallway. But she wouldn't have the book. Or her sword.

Brother Nicolas had said the book was important, dangerous even. And there was no way she was going to let Marcus keep it. She really had no choice. With a sigh of surrender, she ducked her head and entered the gloom.

She started out on her hands and knees, but it was too narrow to crawl, and she lowered herself onto her belly.

She grimaced as she moved forward, her hands clawing into the wet ground. Slick mud. It was completely dark, and she couldn't see where she was going. The squeaking clank of the grate closing behind her sounded, and she paused. Dread stiffened her body. Had he locked her in and stolen the book? "Are you there?"

Shuffling rustled behind her. "Aye," he grunted. "Keep going."

Relief filled her. She wasn't locked in this pit alone. No, she thought, inching forward. She was locked in the dark with someone she didn't know anything about, who had killed Brother Nicolas to steal the book and was now kidnapping her so she could decode it. What was she doing? When she got out of this place, she should...

The cramped tunnel suddenly veered right. She barely noticed, except he caught her foot to stop her.

"Let me go first. There is another grate barring the exit," he told her.

Sage rolled her eyes as she halted and pressed herself as close to the wall as she could. "You couldn't have gone first?"

"You might not have closed the gate. I had to make sure no one knew we had escaped through it." He scooped up beside her. The tunnel was very small and tight. His shoulder bumped her knee as he squeezed next to her. She pressed herself back against the wall as he struggled to move by her, but there wasn't enough room. His shoulder skimmed her body as he crawled forward on his stomach.

As he edged by, she felt a square item in the folds of his monk's robe.

The book!

She lurched forward into him and cried out. Their bodies touched fully, and she rolled on top of him, trying to get to the other side.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, irritated.

"Something ran over me!" she exclaimed, brushing at her hair.

They entwined, limbs and legs swirled in their struggle to be free of each other. He tried to wriggle to the side where Sage was. Sage tried to pull away, but her foot was wrapped in his robe.

"Move your foot," he commanded.

She tried to kick free of the garment, and her knee came up, smashing into his groin. He groaned. She smiled secretly, glad it was dark to hide her pleasure. She tried to wiggle away from him.

He slammed his hand into her shoulder, pushing her back against the wall. "Don't move," he said hoarsely. His hand remained on her shoulder.

Sage stilled.

After a moment, he began to move forward again.

Sage waited until he had crawled past her before lifting her hand with her trophy. The book. She and her sisters were not robbers, but they had been taught the elegance of lifting items from others in times of need. It was something she and Willow had picked up quickly, but not Raven. Right now, Sage was very happy that it came easily to her.

She held the book, savoring her victory, before shoving it inside her armor for safekeeping. She grinned, very pleased with her accomplishment.

She glanced back the way they came, debating returning, but she knew he would come after her. And he had her sword. She was not leaving it with him.

No. She would wait until they were out of the chateau to make her escape.

## Chapter 5

**M**arcus crawled through the dark darkness of the small tunnel. He heard the woman shuffling behind him. He scurried onward, crawling arm over arm. There was no room in the long hole; this was the only way to proceed. He didn't recall the tunnel being so little, but he hadn't used the tunnels in years, not since he had studied with the monks.

Moving silently through the muck gave him a moment to reflect on what he had done. He regretted killing Brother Nicolas. He had not intended to. He had jerked forward to subdue him, to intercept him from laying hands on the book. But the old man had lunged, probably with the misguided attempt to overpower him. Marcus had planned to bind him and leave him—never to kill the old man. It had been an unfortunate accident. Remorse filled him, but he quickly pushed it aside. He couldn't think of that now. He had no time to waste. He had to get out of the tunnel, and away from the chateau before the Templars sent knights after him. And before Sterling discovered he had the book in his possession.

The book was too important. Too many people knew about it and wanted it. He wondered what was inside, what made the book so desirable. Whatever was inside, he would be well-rewarded when he turned over the book to his cousin.

Marcus nodded, pleased with himself. As he saw the light at the end of the tunnel, relief and hope filled him. He was weary of creeping through this dirt.

As he neared the soft sunlight streaming through the slats, he saw large boulders outside the grate opening, hiding it from the world. He reached out to the grate and shoved it. But it didn't budge. With an inhale of frustration, he banged a fist against it to loosen it. It still held tight. God's blood! He would escape this prison. He put his shoulder against the bars and pushed with all his might. Finally, the grate swung open, and he almost toppled out of the tunnel.

The fresh air engulfed him, and he crawled into the muted sunlight of the fading sun. He stood, surveying the area for any witnesses, and adjusted the girl's belt over his shoulder. He had half-expected a group of those red-crossed Templars to be waiting for him. But there was no one.

He turned and extended a hand to the woman.

She glanced at his hand and lifted her chin in disdain, ignoring him as she slid out of the passageway. Then she stood, brushing the dirt from the front of her tight-fitting brown leather armor. "Be careful with my sword."

Marcus scoffed to himself and shook his head. How well could a woman use a blade? Certainly not as well as he could. But, perhaps just well enough for him to be cautious.

He hurried back to the tunnel and closed the grate. It would still be too easy for someone to follow them through the tunnel. Sterling would, no doubt, come this way. He glanced around at the surrounding rocks, choosing a decent-sized boulder. He gaged it with his eyes. It would do. He cast a quick glance at the girl to see her scanning the ground. She was probably plotting her escape. She wouldn't leave without the book, of that he was certain. He had seen the hunger in her eyes, the intensity with which she gazed at it. She wouldn't go anywhere without the book. Or her sword.

Marcus put both of his hands on the boulder and tried to roll it. It was heavier than he thought. He strained, exerting all his energy to tumble it forward and position it before the grate.

He rose and looked at the girl. She stood still, watching him with intelligent eyes. Strands of brown hair had come loose from the braid at her back and flapped about her heart-shaped face in the breeze. One of her hands was behind her back.

She met his gaze evenly.

"Drop it," he ordered.

Her mouth opened in surprise and then snapped closed in fury. She tossed a rock to the side.

He had guessed correctly. She had been going to hit him over the head with a rock and run. He had to admire her intellect. But why would she attempt to escape if she didn't have the book? Maybe she intended to remove it after he was unconscious. Or maybe... Suspicion prickled down his spine, and he dropped his hand to the pocket in his monk's robe. No book. He grinned in admiration. She must have lifted it when they were tussling in the tunnel.

He raised an eyebrow appreciatively. "What's your name?"

Her brown eyes narrowed slightly. "Sage."

The word sent tremors of unease through him. *Sage*. He knew that name. "Hawke?"

She nodded.

He clenched his teeth and groaned inwardly. He had met John Hawke once, but his legend had preceded him. John Hawke and his daughters were well-known for their sword skills, loyalty, and tight family connections. Her family would be coming after him when they found out he had her. He cursed silently. More people tracking him.

He couldn't take any chances. The father was an esteemed fighter and mercenary. The sisters were expertly trained, or so he heard.

"What were you doing at the chateau?" He searched the ground until he found a broken branch with leaves still clinging to it.

"Taking the book to Brother Nicolas," Sage replied.

"*You* had the book?" He believed Christian Sterling was in possession of it. How could he have been so wrong?

"It was a gift to my sister, and we thought Brother Nicolas could help decipher it."

Marcus scoffed as he bent and picked up the branch. "Sterling would never have given that book away."

"You know Christian?"

"Aye," Marcus agreed, brushing the branch over their footsteps to wipe them away. He knew Christian Sterling. He had been tracking him to get the book for months. "We are acquainted." He stood up, surveying the ground. "Why would you seek Nicolas's help?"

"Any help decoding would be advantageous."

Marcus had to agree. A fresh set of eyes might have cracked the code. He tossed the branch aside and gazed at the freshly brushed ground. Then, he nodded to himself in satisfaction.

He looked at Sage again. She was an average-sized girl, not too short, not too tall. He tried to remember what he had heard about her. One girl was beautiful, one girl was an expert swordsman—although they were all quite capable. But Sage...

Sage had managed to steal the book from him. And she would do everything in her power to escape—such as hit him in the head with a rock. Clever girl.

Yes. That's what he had heard about Sage. She was the smartest, the one that could figure anything out.

He grinned. She was exactly what he needed to decode the book. If he handed the book to his cousin and it was decoded, imagine how happy Guillume would be. He might give him more coin. "This way," he said and began to move down the hill.

A line of dark clouds churned in the distance. Sage walked with him. "Where are you taking me?"

"I have a horse tethered near the road."

"And then where?"

"I have been well-paid to deliver the book." His cousin had commissioned him to retrieve it.

"Deliver it to whom?" Sage asked. When Marcus didn't answer, she continued, "Why do you need it decoded if you're just going to hand it over to someone?" She came up beside him, studying his face.

He glanced at her. "Why would *you* have the book decoded before giving it to someone?"

Sage brushed off his statement with a rolling of her eyes. "I would want to know exactly what the book hid. What was inside." She stared at him thoughtfully for a moment, and then, her eyes narrowed. "I would want to know what was so important to pay someone to kill for."

He grinned. He continued down the small hill, rolling his shoulder to keep her belt in place.

"If you knew what was inside, you could either use it for your benefit or negotiate for more coin," Sage continued.

She might be too smart for her own good. He wanted to prove to Guillume that he was capable of any mission given him. He glanced at the darkening sky just as a bolt of lightning lit it. "It's going to rain. We have to get inside."

"Inside where?"

"We'll go into the town. I know people there."

"Who are you?"

He stopped and turned to her. "My apologies. I am Marcus de Nogarert." He bowed slightly.

Sage scowled at him as if trying to place him.

He sighed softly, knowing questions would follow, and walked down the hill. "You've heard of my cousin, Guillume de Nogarert."

"Yes! He attacked Pope Boniface and had Pope Benedict poisoned."

"There was never proof of that."

"Well, he did lead the attack on Boniface. And he's excommunicated."

"He will be absolved," Marcus stated lamely. He always had to explain the actions of his cousin to those he met, which irked him. Although their names were the same, he was nothing like his cousin. "He is now the keeper of the seal and a very powerful man."

"To the king. Yes. I've heard that."

They walked to a dirt road lined by tall trees. Marcus led her across the path to a group of trees where a saddled horse was tied to one of them. He ran a hand along the black steed's neck, and the horse tossed his head and nickered. Marcus whispered, "Easy, my friend."

Marcus looked back at Sage. She was looking down the road, possibly plotting another attempted escape. He had no time to be tracking an escaped woman. He walked back to her.

"I want to know what secrets that book holds as much as you do." He stared into her defiant brown eyes. They were wide and ringed with long, dark lashes. "I'll let you hold the book..."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise, and then she snapped it closed.

"I know you lifted it from my pocket. I know you have it."

She shook her head as if to deny it but then stopped. "Maybe you



dropped it in the tunnels.”

“And perchance, you have it tucked inside your armor.” His gaze swept over her shapely figure, her leather armor adhering to each curve. He didn’t know where she had hidden it, but he knew it was there.

“We should go back to the tunnels and check,” she advised.

He stepped closer to her. “Or I can search you. That would be a much more pleasant option.”

Her lips pursed in disapproval, and she scowled stubbornly.

“As I was saying, I’ll let you hold onto the book for now, as I promised.”

She grunted. “Such an honorable man,” she muttered.

His insides tensed at the mockery. If she were a man, he would have belted her across the chin. As it was, he gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. “Thank you.”

Confusion flashed in her eyes before it disappeared.

“You may hold the book until you have decoded it. Then, I must have it back to give to my cousin.” He held up a finger. “And you must promise not to attempt escape, or I will have to bind you.”

## Chapter 6

Sage's gaze swept over Marcus de Nogaret, saying, "He was no monk. Even though he wore the robe of a monk, he had a sword strapped to his waist. And he had her sword. It was much too expensive to abandon to a murderer. That was the only reason she had not run."

Marcus was tall, about as tall as her father, and wore his blond hair pushed back from his face, likely to appear similar in appearance to a monk. Despite all his flaws, he wanted the same thing she did. He wanted the book decoded. And then what? After she did it—or worse yet, failed to do it—would he kill her as he had Nicolas? "I don't trust you."

"We are even on that account. Still, I must have your word, or I will have to bind you."

"Why would you believe me? I could lie."

"You are a Hawke. Your word is your oath."

He was right. She and her family never lied. Well, not to others. They stretched the truth quite a bit with one another, but never to others. She couldn't give her word. She knew she would try again and again to escape him—especially since she didn't know what he would do once he got what he wanted. "Am I to give you my word only to then be murdered?"

"Murdered?" he echoed in surprise. He shook his head in disappointment and returned to the horse, removing her belt and sword from his shoulder.

Sage knew she had no choice. She had to try to escape. Now.

She had to do something. Her gaze moved over the area. The hill behind her would be too difficult to run up. He would catch her too easily. The road stretched in either direction. Trees lined the side of the road.

It was her best bet. She might be able to lose him in the trees.

She waited a moment longer before rushing up to him and, with all her might, plowing her shoulder into his side. She hooked her foot around his ankle, tripping him when he attempted to gain his balance. She ripped her belt free of his hold and bolted toward the trees. If she could reach them, she had a chance of losing him.

Her arms pumped; her legs sprinted across the dirt before the trees. Her focus was on the thick trunks of the trees, even as she heard his

footfalls behind her. Her breathing came in quick gasps, and blood pounded in her ears. If she could only make it to the cover of the tree line. She knew he was chasing her and pushed herself to go as fast as she could. Just a little more. Just...

He lunged, seizing her around the legs, and tackled her to the ground.

Sage kicked backwards, catching him in the chin, and crawled away. As she attempted to get to her feet, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back down to the ground.

Sage squirmed while trying to break free of his grip, her fingers digging into the dirt as she crept forward, but he flipped her onto her back. She tried to hit him with her sheathed sword, but he snatched the belt from her and tossed it aside.

He pinned her to the ground with the full weight of his body.

She balled her fist for a blow to his face. When she swung, he caught her hand and shoved it against the ground. With her free hand, she reached up to grab his hair at the side of his head, tugging with all her strength.

Marcus grimaced in pain, clenching his teeth, and seizing her wrist. For a moment, they were frozen in an impasse.

"That hurts," he said through clenched teeth.

She entwined her fingers tightly in his locks of hair. "Then let me go."

His lip twitched in fury above his straight teeth. "You can pull out all of my hair, but I'm not going to let you go."

She knew he was right. She would eventually have to release his hair, and he would win. She tried to wiggle her balled fist from his hold, but he held it firmly to the ground. She lifted her torso from the ground, attempting to buck him off her, but he pushed her down with the weight of his body. Her mind churned, trying to come up with a solution, but she knew she had lost. There was no way to break free. Just to spite him, she yanked his hair harder before releasing her grip.

Immediately, he shoved her wrist to the ground, so both were pinned. He held her there for a long moment, gazing in anger down at her. His stare raked her face and settled for a moment on her lips.

A strange tingling sensation swept through her before she lifted her chin bravely and defiantly.

With a growl, he rolled off her and hauled her to her feet. He kept his hand shackled over her right wrist as he bent to pick up her sheathed sword.

She clenched her teeth as he pulled her back to his horse.

He dropped her sword to the ground and tugged open one of the saddlebags. He reached inside and dragged out a rope. "Give me the book."

Panic rushed through Sage, and her lips thinned in determination.

With a quick yank, he tugged her against him, so their bodies touched, and he lifted his hand to plunge it down the front of her armor.

Horried, angered, she slapped at his hand with her free hand. "I'll get it."

When he lowered his hand, she stepped away from him, still shackled to him by her right wrist. She shoved her hand down the front of her armor and easily found the book. She hesitated for a moment, glaring at him. A red mark had formed on his cheek where she kicked had him. Satisfied at the mark, she pulled the book free.

He snatched it from her hand and tossed it to the ground.

A spear of lightning forked in the sky above their heads, and Sage cringed.

He grabbed her free hand and pushed her wrists together, wrapping the rope around them.

Sage scowled. She had lost this battle. But the war was just beginning. Marcus didn't know she was leaving a trail for her sisters of ripped parchment from the page she had taken from Brother Nicolas.



Marcus rode with Sage before him into the town. She sat sidesaddle and his hands wrapped around her to grip the reins, just in case she decided to slide from the horse and flee.

His jaw still ached from her kick, but he resisted the urge to caress it. He wouldn't let her know she had hurt him. He had mistaken her for a timid woman, not a woman who would fight to escape. It was a mistake he would not make again. Everything he had heard of the Hawke women was true. He would not forget it.

Yet, he thought back to when he had to restrain her, when he was on top of her. Her lips. Her full, wet lips. When he had her pinned to the ground, his gaze had found her lips, even in his anger. It was the most ridiculous thing. And now, he thought of them again, wondering what they would taste like. He scoffed silently. That would never happen. And he didn't want it to.

The sky was dark, and lightning flashed above their heads, followed by a loud boom. He steadied his horse and urged the animal through the street.

Most of the villagers were scrambling to get to cover before the storm hit. A woman seized her boy's hand, pulling him into a daub and wattle cottage. A man led a horse beneath the shelter of a

building. A child chased a duck across the road toward home.

Marcus steered the steed toward the smithy, spurring it into a gallop. Gareth, the blacksmith, was a family friend. Marcus had known him his entire life. On his travels, his father had often visited Gareth's shop for weapons. Many knights sought Gareth out for his expertise in sword making, including Templars and the king. He boasted loyalty to the king, but Marcus knew his true loyalty was to coin.

As the first big drops began to fall from the sky, Marcus reached the smithy and guided the horse into the small yard.

A young boy with bowl-cut dark hair rushed out of the wooden building to greet them. When thunder clapped overhead, the boy flinched.

Marcus held the horse steady with a firm hand as he attempted to rear. He quickly flipped the boy the reins and swung his leg over the horse to dismount. He turned to help Sage, only to find her easing from the saddle and landing on the ground on her feet. As the sky opened with a deluge of water, he took her arm and hurriedly directed her inside the smithy.

As he entered, he brushed the water from his eyes and scanned the room.

It was organized chaos. Against the wall, swords, axes, and horseshoes hung, all forged by Gareth. Against the back wall, a large stone oven stood, its fire long since smothered. A bellows stood before the forge to keep the coals hot. A square anvil was positioned to the side of the forge. Beside this, a bucket of water stood nearby. Hammers, tongs, and the rest of his tools were organized around the walls. The smell of burning metal hung thickly in the air.

A door at the side of the room opened. A short man, with a balding head and gray hair that hung in strings on the sides of his face, strolled out.

Marcus noticed he was not wearing his leather apron, so he knew Gareth was done working for the day.

Gareth's gaze swept Sage and then lit on Marcus. A grin stretched his lips. "Marcus!"

Marcus stepped forward and grasped his arm just below the elbow. Gareth returned the greeting, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Good to see you, old friend," Marcus said.

"Old friend?" Gareth winced. "That means you need something. Whenever you call me 'old friend,' you want something."

Marcus put a hand to his chest. "You wound me."

"Do I?" Gareth asked. "When was the last time you visited without asking me for a favor?"

Marcus bridled, not being able to think of even one time he had

come for only a visit. "I'm busy."

Gareth nodded. "As I suspected." He glanced at Sage and then back at Marcus. "What is it this time?"

"A night out of the storm is all I ask."

Gareth glanced at Sage again. He draped an arm around Marcus's shoulder and led him into a corner away from Sage. "Do you have something else to tell me?"

Marcus watched Sage intently as he inhaled and let it out slowly. "Nothing you want to know."

Gareth's face fell with seriousness. His lips pursed. "Do not get me involved in anything, Nogaret. I don't want trouble."

"That's why I'm not telling you."

Gareth rolled his eyes. "One night. That is all. You and your 'friend' can sleep in the loft for the night."

Marcus nodded, grateful. "Thank you." He glanced at Sage. "This way." Marcus guided Sage up a set of stairs to a door. He opened it and allowed her to enter before he did.

The room was small, with one straw mattress against the wall across from the door. A lit candle and flint and steel lay near the door.

Sage stalked across the room and sat on the straw, leaving Marcus to stand before the door. He closed it softly.

She glared hotly at him until the boy knocked quietly on the door. When Marcus opened it, he handed him a meal of bread and ale. Marcus bobbed his head in thanks and shut the door. He offered some to Sage, but she lifted her chin and turned away, refusing to eat. She sat with her back against the wall, and her knees pulled up to her chest, watching him.

Marcus ate. He was no fool. He was going to need all his strength to watch her. He did not untie her. He couldn't trust she wouldn't try to escape again. Although, she didn't have the book. Marcus dropped his hand to his pocket to be certain. With relief, he felt the rectangular shape. That gave him reason to hope she would not attempt another escape.

His gaze shifted to her belt and scabbard resting beside him. He knew he would return her sword to her soon. Foolish as he was, he wouldn't keep it. She would be safer with her weapon in case robbers or Templar knights attacked them.

When he had finished eating, he extinguished the candle and stretched out on the hard floor in front of the door.

Thunder rumbled over their heads, and the onslaught of rain hitting the roof pounded through the room. Gareth had seemingly vanished. It was better that way, Marcus thought. Gareth didn't need to interact with Sage. Who knew what she would tell him?

A Hawke.

Of all the women, why did it have to be a Hawke?

She was trouble.

Her family would be searching for her. Relentlessly. But nothing would stop him from delivering that book to his cousin and collecting the reward. Nothing.

He heard movement and glanced toward the mattress against the opposite wall. As a flash of lightning lit the room through a slat at the bottom of the door, he saw her sitting up like a specter in the night.

"Are you well?"

"I would like to see the book," she replied quietly.

"For what?"

"It is difficult to decipher if I can't see it."

Marcus hesitated, wondering what type of trick this was. But she was correct. She couldn't decode it without seeing it. "You should sleep. We'll be riding for a while on the morrow."

"I should. But I can't."

After a moment of indecision, he reached into his pocket and pulled the book out. He handed it to her.

She took it eagerly, even though her hands were bound.

He felt guilty, leaving her bound. But she had brought it upon herself. He would have been happy enough to leave her unbound. Now, she had made that impossible.

"Can you light the candle?" Sage asked.

Suspicion narrowed his eyes. Was he this mistrustful of every one of her requests? With a sigh, he leaned forward and used the flint and steel beside the candle to light it.

"I need a piece of parchment and quill," she replied.

At least that was an innocent request. He opened the door and called down to the boy, instructing him to bring parchment and quill.

Then he closed the door and sat back against it. Thunder rolled overhead. His eyes rested upon Sage. She had removed her hair from the braid, and now her brown locks hung in waves about her shoulders. She was a thin girl, but he knew from personal experience that she could fight.

She was not concerned with him. Her full concentration was taken up with the book.

A knock came at the door, and Marcus opened it slightly. The boy handed the quill, parchment, and ink to him. Marcus nodded appreciatively before shutting the door. He passed them to Sage.

He leaned back against the door, relaxing one hand on his bent knee. It was going to be a long night.



Marcus watched Sage work in the wavering light of the candle. His eyes continued to drift closed, but he couldn't fall asleep. Unable to resist, he had reluctantly untied her wrists so she could work. She was tenacious. Focused. She sat on the floor in the corner, her knees crossed, the book on her knee. Candlelight fell about her, and Marcus studied her in his corner of darkness. She was interesting. Confident. Her dark locks formed a cave for her work, tumbling over her shoulders and down toward the floor. Her brow creased in concentration. Her lips pursed in thought—the lips he had imagined kissing before. He pushed that thought from his mind.

Most women would have been terrified of being kidnapped by a killer, but Sage showed no fear. Only certainty. She was either too confident in her abilities, or she was too obsessed with the book. Still, he had to be on guard with her. She was a Hawke.

And that was another problem. Her family. He knew they were tracking him now. In many ways, he was envious of her connection with her family. He had never been close to his. Before she passed away, his mother had spent most of her time doting on his sister. His father...was obsessed with strength. Marcus could never live up to his father's ideals. And he didn't want to. His sister had married, and her husband hadn't approved of the life Marcus led. Marcus didn't want to cause trouble between Emma and her husband, so he rarely saw his sister, even though he desired to speak with her. She was kind and loving. And he missed her.

Then there was Guillume. The closest thing to a brother he had.

And, of course, Rose.

His eyes drifted closed. But he forced them open to find Sage writing on the parchment. Damn. He couldn't allow himself to sleep. She had tried to escape once; he was certain she would again. He could simply tell her enough was enough and extinguish the candle, but he wanted her to decode the book as much as she did. Yet, he was exhausted.

He mentally shook himself. The book. Why was it so important to Guillume? What could be in that book? He didn't know why it was so important to Sterling, either. What did they expect to find? Gold? Riches? Something else? He had asked his cousin, but Guillume wouldn't tell him. That only increased Marcus's curiosity. What was Guillume hiding? Was the book worth keeping himself if there were treasure to be found from it?

Why else would Guillume commission him to get it? His mind



churned. He didn't know much about what Guillume had been up to in the last year after the suspicious death of Pope Benedict.

Marcus had been at an inn, in between jobs, when a soldier had found him and given him a missive from Guillume. His cousin wanted to speak with him.

Marcus had traveled a day to meet with him. There was no reason not to. While the missive was a surprise, he had been glad to see his cousin. It had been years since he had last seen Guillume. And they were friends.

Guillume had charged him with retrieving the book for the king. Marcus had heard how loyal Guillume was to the ruler. If Marcus had declined the charge, would Guillume have had him arrested for his disloyalty? Marcus grinned. No. Not Guillume. They would do anything for each other. Marcus had assumed this mission was something Guillume could not entrust to a stranger, hence the reason for summoning him.

In his mind, Guillume suddenly stood before him again, dark hair swaying about his shoulders as he walked with his hands clasped behind his back. "You know this is a matter of the utmost secrecy."

Marcus nodded.

"It will be dangerous. There are others after the book." Guillume placed a hand on his shoulder. "But I trust you. You are family." His lips curved up in a grin.

As Marcus stared into his eyes, a red glow emanated from them. And suddenly, his teeth elongated to jagged points. Marcus gasped and jerked.

He was suddenly in the loft above the smithy. He swallowed heavily and looked about. Guillume was not there. His gaze settled on the flickering candle in the corner.

Neither was Sage.

## Chapter 7

**M**arcus stood quickly, glancing around the small room and then looking back at the straw mattress again. Empty. Even her sheath and belt were gone. How had she moved him from the door and slipped out? It didn't matter. He opened the door and hurried down the stairs. Had she run? If he were in her position, he would have. Anger simmered in his veins.

She had the book and her sword.

The smithy was dark. The continuous rumble of the torrential downpour sounded on the roof. Had she left the smithy in this weather? He started for the exit when he heard a muted conversation from behind the opposite doorway leading to Gareth's chambers. He paused, listening. Two people were speaking, but he couldn't make out the words. He crossed the smithy and knocked on the door before swinging it open.

Gareth and Sage looked up as he opened the door. They sat across from each other at a wooden table, a bowl of pottage before each of them. Sage's bowl was pushed aside and empty. She held the book flat before her, the parchment next to it, the quill in her hand.

Marcus's hot gaze swung to Gareth in silent accusation.

"Poor girl was hungry," Gareth explained. "Are ya starving her?"

Marcus shifted his gaze to Sage. She had likely started to make a run for it, but Gareth had seen her. Marcus was sure that was what had happened exactly. His eyes narrowed.

Sage grinned innocently.

"Ale?" Gareth asked.

Marcus nodded and sat beside Sage. His gaze scanned the parchment as Gareth stood to retrieve a flask of ale from a nearby bench.

"Gareth was glad you untied me," Sage commented. She placed her hand flat on the parchment. "He said it was unmanly to tie a woman."

Marcus ignored the insult. "He doesn't know you as I do." It was almost as if she was hiding the document from his view. "Did you need your sword to get food?"

She grinned a half-smile. "You never know who you might run into."

Marcus grunted in disbelief. His stare moved to the parchment. "Any luck?"

Sage shrugged. "That depends on what you mean by 'luck.'"

He couldn't see much beneath her splayed fingers. "Then I shall be more precise in my wording. Have you decoded any words?"

Sage looked down at the text and then at the book. "No," she finally admitted.

Her movement was strange. It was clear she didn't want him to see the parchment. His stare moved over what he could see of the page, what her hand was not covering. None of the words made any sense.

She quickly folded the document in half and tucked it inside the book.

She didn't want him to see what she was doing. His gaze slowly, suspiciously, shifted to her eyes.

Sage glanced at the mug of ale before her. She picked it up and drank deeply.

What was she hiding?



Sage set the pottery mug down and pretended to study the book. "It's difficult because I am guessing."

He stared hard at her.

She kept her gaze on the book, furrowing her brow as if in thought. She felt his intense gaze on her, and she mentally told herself not to panic. Even when Gareth gave Marcus the flask, he didn't take his stare from her. Had he figured out what she was doing? Her father had told her never to underestimate anyone. She ran a finger along the letters in the first line of the book. She wasn't even close to deciphering the words.

That was not what she was doing.

She was copying the book.

She had spent the entire night working on it, refusing to sleep. She had carefully copied each letter, each sentence. That way, she could leave Marcus with the book and still have a copy of it. He would not come after her when she escaped. Or so she hoped.

The boy, Thomas, had been incredibly helpful, securing three extra pieces of parchment. The copy of the book took up the front and backside of one-and-a-half pages. On the second page, she had listed the alphabet, as she had seen Brother Nicolas do. Next to the G, she wrote an A. Just as she and Brother Nicolas had deciphered. Below the alphabet, she wrote the first line and replaced all the G's with A's. But she had not even begun to decipher any of the words. She wanted to make certain she had a copy of the book first.

Marcus finally turned away from her and took a deep drink of the ale.

Sage relaxed, letting a small, silent breath escape her lips.

"Sage came down and was hungry. We began to talk," Gareth explained.

Marcus slowly lowered the flask. "What did you talk about?"

"Thomas," Gareth offered. "And a little about the Hawke family."

Sage grinned. She had purposely mentioned her family in case they came looking for her. She hoped Gareth would tell them she was safe, so they wouldn't worry.

Marcus's stare was back on her.

She snapped the book closed. "We also spoke about Gareth's smithy and his skill, the weather, and the town."

"You've been down here for a while."

Sage shrugged. "You were sleeping."

His blue eyes narrowed slightly.

She stood up. "Thank you for the ale and conversation, Gareth."

Gareth nodded.

Sage returned to the loft.



Marcus rose to follow her, but Gareth seized his wrist.

"Are you mad?" Gareth hissed.

Marcus scowled at him. "Sometimes."

"She is Sage Hawke. A *Hawke*," Gareth released his wrist, shaking his head. "I can't protect you from this."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Marcus," Gareth pleaded, holding his hands before him, palms up. "They will come looking for her. It's the Hawkes! John Hawke is a legend. I can't lie to them. Not even for you."

Marcus placed his hand reassuringly on Gareth's shoulder. "I never asked you to lie. I only asked for shelter from the storm."

Gareth sighed and bowed his head. "You always make me feel guilty. But this..." He glanced up at the ceiling as if gazing at Sage. "I don't know what you are messed up in, Marcus. But this is big. And dangerous."

Marcus chuckled. "Stop. You are frightening me," he mocked and turned to walk out of the room. "Thank you for your help. We will be gone before sunup."

As Marcus emerged from the room, the boy who had greeted them hopped merrily down the stairs from the loft. Marcus caught his

shoulder. "What were you doing up there?"

"The lady needed more parchment and ink," the boy answered proudly.

Marcus cast a glance at the loft. "Is that all?"

"I brought her a flask of ale."

Marcus grimaced. He didn't think that was all that the boy had brought. Sage had made a friend. A friend who would bring her whatever she asked him to. She was clever and resourceful. But there was one thing he had that she didn't. Marcus released the boy's shoulder and reached into his coin pouch. He tossed him a coin. "Tell me whatever she requires."

The boy gazed at the coin in surprise and then nodded enthusiastically, a lock of dark hair falling before his eyes. "Aye." He scurried away.

Marcus watched him. Most people valued coin over everything else. He grinned, pleased with himself. He could match wits with Sage. The only problem was, did she ever sleep? He had to sleep to be fresh and on guard for those following him. He had no doubt Sterling was tracking him, as well as the Templar knights. He had to stay one step ahead of all of them.

When he came to the loft, soft candlelight flickered over the small area.

Sage was stretched out on the straw mattress, an arm over her eyes. Neither the book nor the parchments were anywhere to be seen.

His gaze moved slowly over her body. Her tight-fitting leather armor covered her torso like a second skin. Her breeches fit snugly to her shapely legs. She must have tucked the book and parchment back into her armor as she had before. His gaze perused her curvy form again. He couldn't imagine where the book was. Her leather armor fit perfectly over her breasts and down over her hips.

His stare lingered on her hips for a moment before he cleared his throat. "We need to set up some rules."

No response. No movement.

"Sage?" he called. But she didn't move. It was then he realized she was asleep. An exhale of relief escaped his lips. Finally!

He closed the door and positioned himself before it, stretching out. He would catch some rest before she woke again. Then, they would talk.



When Marcus awakened in the morning, Sage was still sleeping.

He silently departed the room, pausing in the smithy to tell Gareth not to let her leave if she woke. Gareth grumbled something and continued pounding out a piece of steel on the anvil. Marcus didn't hear what he said, and he didn't think he wanted to know.

As he left the smithy, something caught his gaze in the wet dirt at the side of the doorway. A small beige item that looked incredibly out of place in the damp mud. It could have been the petal of a flower or a piece of onion. He shrugged it off and continued, walking briskly down the road until he came upon a man in a straw hat leaning against the side of a wattle and daub building. The man was whittling a bird.

Marcus stopped before him. He handed him a coin. "Can you get a message to Guillaume de Nogaret?"

The man turned the coin over in his hand and then looked up at him from beneath his large, brimmed hat. "Aye."

"Tell him I have it, and I'll rendezvous with him in five days' time."

The man nodded; his hat bobbed with the movement.

As Marcus turned to go back to the smithy, a white tunic with a red cross on it caught his attention. He paused. Two knights strolled down the street, the red cross on their chests emblazoned for all to see.

Templar Knights.

## Chapter 8

**L**ight brightened the inside lids of Sage's eyes. She opened them and blinked at the sunlight filling the room. She sat up, immediately running her hands across her torso, feeling inside her armor for the book. The book pressed up against her ribs. It was still there. She mentally scoffed to herself. What did she think? That Marcus would have searched her while she slept and removed it from inside her armor without her knowing? He wasn't that skilled.

She looked around the room for him, but he wasn't there. She had almost finished copying the book the night before. She had started decoding it in case Marcus asked her about deciphering it. She could show him the work she had done by displaying the alphabet parchment. She reached into her armor and pulled out the book, staring at it. She ran her thumb thoughtfully over the leather. She loved the feel of the soft cover against her fingertips, the weight of the book, and even the smell.

But she knew that to escape, she would have to leave it. Leave it with a man who killed Brother Nicolas. Nicolas had warned her not to trust anyone. And she wouldn't.

She opened the book and removed the parchment. She glanced toward the open door but saw no one. She only heard the tinging of a hammer striking steel and knew someone was working in the smithy. She turned to the last page, grasped the quill and ink, and began copying the book—only one page to go.

She heard footsteps coming up the stairs and quickly blew on the parchment to dry the ink before folding it and tucking it into her boot. So close to finishing! She turned the book to the first page when Marcus appeared in the doorway

"You're up."

She looked up...

And froze.

He had removed his monk's robe. He wore black boots that came up to his knees, black leggings that fit snugly against his muscular thighs, and a dark green tunic that covered his torso, open at the neck to a V. His belt and scabbard were wrapped around his waist.

Sage's mouth dropped slightly. She hadn't known he had such a strong physique. His tunic clung tightly over his arms and chest. She closed her mouth and tucked the book into her armor before standing.

Her gaze swept him, and she put her hands on her hips. "You didn't like pretending to be a monk?"

"I wanted to be less conspicuous. We will be leaving soon."

She glanced longingly at her belt and sheath, where they lay on the floor. "Where are we going?"

He ignored her. "How is the decoding proceeding?"

She shrugged. "It's difficult. It will take time to figure it all out." And even more time because she couldn't read.

"The sooner you decode that book, the better it will be for all of us."

That sounded like a threat. Her stare traveled over him. "I'm doing what I can." She put her hands together at the wrists and held them out for him to bind.

He looked at her hands and then at her face. "It would be less conspicuous to travel without having to tie you."

She lowered her hands. Less conspicuous, but foolish. She nodded.

"I do not want to have to chase you again."

"You won't have to," she agreed.

"You won't try to escape again?"

She grinned. "Next time, you won't find me."

He sighed softly in resignation and held his hand out. "Give me the book."

Stupid, she berated herself. She stood defiantly still for a long moment before tearing the black leather-bound book from inside her armor and slapping it into his palm.

He nodded and gathered up her sword and belt. Then, he swept an arm out for her to move down the stairs.

He was pretty smart to realize she wouldn't attempt escape without the book or her weapon. If only she had finished copying the book. She descended the stairs, thanked Gareth, and stepped outside.

Thomas held the reins of the horse. When the boy turned to the horse to check the bridle, Sage glanced down. The small piece of parchment she had dropped the night before was still there. She was using the parchment from Brother Nicolas's desk. Last night, she had ripped it into several small pieces and put them in the pocket of her breeches.

She grinned. She was leaving a path for her sisters.



As they rode along the road, Sage wondered where her sisters were. Had they met up with her father, as they intended to? They



must be searching for her. Where were they?

She and Marcus had been riding for half the day when Marcus steered his steed off the road and into the brush. A stream ran behind a set of trees, off the main road. He dismounted and reached up for Sage.

Sage ignored him and slid to the ground. She didn't need help. Not from him.

It was interesting. At times, she was furious with him. At times, curious. At least he had not bound her hands again.

He tied the horse's reins to a tree near the stream to allow the horse to drink before turning to Sage. "The horse needs to rest."

Sage nodded.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"More curious."

"About?" He rummaged through the bags on the horse.

"You."

He paused but didn't look at her. Then, he pulled out a loaf of bread and returned to her side. He sat on the ground and held a piece out to her. She shook her head. He took a bite of the bread and watched her with his bright blue eyes, waiting. They caught the sun and were the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Gorgeous.

She mentally shook herself. "Are you a knight?" she asked.

"Would it matter?"

No. Not in the least. But he hadn't answered her question. "Do you know how to use that weapon?" She jerked her chin toward his sword.

He lowered the bread and straightened his back. He swallowed his bite before answering, "Would you like to find out?"

A grin twitched her lips. "Yes," she answered with more enthusiasm than she wanted to show.

He slowly rose.

For the first time, Sage noticed his powerful movements, his grace. Like a lion. Intrigued, she waited for him to remove his weapon. She wasn't sure if he really intended to cross swords with her. He knew who she was. He must know how good she was with a weapon.

He returned to the horse and retrieved her belt and sword. He walked back to her and handed them to her.

She stared at them, so very appreciative to finally wear them again. She strapped on her belt, relishing the familiar feel. She felt whole again.

Slowly, purposely, he eased his blade from its sheath. The hiss was a familiar sound to Sage. Anticipation burned in her veins. Oh, this was going to be fun. She ached to exercise her body, and this was the perfect way to do so. If she unarmed him, she would tie him up, take the book, and make her escape. Suspicion wormed through her. He

must realize that too. So, he must be good. She would not underestimate him.

She drew her sword. It hissed like a snake ready to strike.

He approached leisurely, lithely, and crossed blades with her. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I told you before that I wasn't afraid of you," Sage answered, gazing at him through the crossed metal of the blades. Fighting wasn't her favorite thing to do, but it certainly was exercise, and after a half-day of riding, she could use it. Plus, it gave her a chance to see how skilled he actually was with a sword.

They stood that way for a moment before he exploded in swings, striking her blade again and again.

The tings rang out through the small glade.

Sage was hard-put to defend herself, but she was no beginner. She allowed him to drive her back; she allowed him to think he had the advantage as she watched for a weak spot in his attack. Anything. Instead, she was impressed by his skill. He used his whole body to direct the blow, and he was quick, powerful.

She deflected his blows. Each strike against her weapon rippled up her arm.

He caught her sword with his and swirled his wrist in a circle. If she had not been trained her entire life to fight, her weapon would have spun out of her hand. But she was trained. Well. She grinned. It was an admirable move. But not good enough. She held the pommel of her sword firmly.

She planted her foot and stood her ground, defending against his blows.

The swords clanged with each blow, ringing through the forest.

For the first time in the encounter, Sage attacked, swinging her sword at him. He leaned away from her parries, and her blade hissed through the air in a semicircle, inches from his chest. She thrust, and he dodged to the side, bringing his sword up toward her neck.

She stepped back, avoiding the tip of his blade.

They circled one another. Sage breathed deeply. She admired his skill. But this was child's play. They were testing each other.

He lunged in, and she knocked his blade aside. She pushed forward with a cache of swings until she was close enough to hook her foot behind his. When he stepped back, he tripped and fell flat onto his back.

Standing over him, Sage put the tip of her weapon to his neck.

He grinned from his position on the ground. "Impressive." He brought his blade up, pushing hers away, and rolled to his feet, bringing his weapon up before him.

Sage held her sword with two hands, unmoving. He was good. She

would give him that. But she wanted to escape with the book. Playtime was over. She attacked, driving forward.

He knocked her sword aside and deflected each of her blows, answering with his own.

It was a dance of death, a dance of skill. Thrusting and parrying. Swords rang out through the forest like the beat of a drum.

Sage retreated to a tree trunk and ducked his swing. It lodged in the bark above her head, and she spun away. He pulled the weapon free and continued after her with a flurry of strikes.

She knocked them away, using a two-handed grip on the handle of her weapon for more strength. She pushed one of his arcs aside, and he stumbled. Perchance over a branch or stone, she didn't know which. He backed into the trunk of a tree. She quickly stepped in close, placing the side edge of her blade to his neck.

Time froze. Her arm was bent, so the sharp side of the blade pressed against his throat.

She had him.

She won.

His gaze moved over her face.

She was so near to him that their bodies were touching, and Sage could feel the heat radiating from him. She held the blade to his neck, breathing deeply. She was suddenly aware of how close they were, how her breasts brushed his chest. Even through her armor, her nipples tingled and hardened. Her gaze swept his face. From his deep blue eyes to his sensual lips. She swallowed in a suddenly dry throat.

"Well done," he said.

His voice was a husky whisper. And still, she did not move away from him. She had won! What was she doing? Escape! She pushed the blade tighter against his throat.

He cocked his head slightly. "Always know how many weapons your opponent has on him."

She felt a slight pressure against her side, just below her armor, and looked down. He pointed a small dagger at her ribcage. Surprise and realization and finally, grudging admiration washed over her. She stepped back and lowered her sword. He was well trained. Skilled. And so very handsome.

Shocked at the thought, Sage retreated another step. But now that the thought was in her mind, she suddenly noticed his blond hair hanging in curls to the nape of his neck and marveled at just how blue his eyes were. They sparkled as if some kind of rare gem.

She scoffed at herself. What did she care how blue his eyes were? Would that help her decode the book? She should only care that he had ruthlessly killed Brother Nicolas and kidnapped her. Not how blue his eyes were, or the way his tunic fit over his chest and arm muscles.

He sheathed his sword and returned to the horse.

Sage looked down at her weapon. She could have escaped. It had been her chance. Disgusted at herself, she slid her sword into its scabbard. What would Raven say? Disappointment sagged her shoulders. She could have escaped with the book.

At least she had a plan. She reached inside the pocket of her breeches and pulled out a small piece of parchment. She dropped it on the ground near a pile of leaves. Her sisters would know they had come this way.

Unwillingly, her gaze followed his path and covertly watched him as he dug in one of the bags. She might be unhappy about her lost opportunity to escape, but at least she had something to distract her. And what a distraction he was.

## Chapter 9

**T**hey traveled until sunset and rested in a clearing. As the light moon rose in the cloudy sky, Sage sat on the ground, staring down at the open book. She finished copying the book as Marcus removed the saddle from the horse.

She tucked the copied parchment of the book into her boot. Now she was ready to make her escape. She would do it tonight when he slept. In the meantime, she could attempt to decode the book. The challenge of figuring out the book's secret was like a shadow constantly following her—the desire to decode the book burned in her veins. Imagine! If she could do this, she could do anything. Her father would finally be proud of her. He would finally see she was capable of more than just picking locks.

Determined, her gaze swept the letters. The words all looked so foreign to her. None of them made sense because they were not words. When she sounded them out, they were incomprehensible. Her shoulders sagged.

She would never decode it.

Two pieces of parchment lay spread out beside the open book, one on either side. She flipped the feather of the quill back and forth across her lips in thought. What word was “zu” meant to be? In? Do?

She looked from the book to her parchment where she had copied the first line. She specifically stared at that two-letter word. “Zu.” There were so many words it could be. She closed her eyes to concentrate. Of. In. To. How was she to know which word it was? She opened her eyes and gazed at the copied first line. If she couldn't figure that out, she would never figure out the entire book. It was so frustrating. If she could only read longer words.

“Are you hungry?”

Marcus startled her. She whirled, her hand dropping to the pommel of her weapon beside her. Then, she sat back with an exasperated sigh. “No,” she snapped. Then, she forced herself to calm. “Sorry.”

“Tell me what you're working on.” He sat beside her, looking down at the book and parchment.

“Are you offering to help me?” she scoffed. “I don't need help.”

“You look irritated, and it might help to talk about what you're doing.”

She sighed. What would it hurt? He'd never be able to figure it out, but she might get ideas from a fresh pair of eyes. "I'm trying to figure out what 'zu' stands for. See here?" She pointed to it in the book. "It must be a two-letter word. But there are so many two-letter words. In, of, to."

"Hmmm." He stared at the page.

The light of the moon washed over the parchment, illuminating the dark letters.

She gazed at the first line, "Zgqk sgot xugj kgyz zu loxyz ixuyyxugj," and concentrated on the "zu."

"Both letters are in other words. See here?" She pointed to the first word. "Z is the first letter. U is here, here, and here." Her finger skimmed along the line, pausing at the U's.

He bent forward, scowling. His arm brushed hers. Sage's body tingled, and she glanced at him. His blond hair fell forward in waves. His brow was furrowed in focus. His lips pursed in a thin line.

He was very handsome. She leaned toward him, inhaling. He smelled of the forest and leather.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to the second line in the book.

She mentally shook herself and followed his finger to where he indicated. It was the second line, "Mu." "That's another two-letter word."

"They both have the same letter."

Prickles raced up her spine. They did.

"What two-letter words have the same second letter?" They asked in unison.

Sage stared at Marcus, a grin on her lips. "An? In?"

"At. It. You should make a list." He signaled the parchment. "Write the words down."

Sage agreed and flipped the parchment over. She dipped her quill into the inkpot and started writing the words. She had to go slow because she had to sound them out.

"Go," Marcus continued, watching her write. "Do. To."

"On," Sage offered, writing the letters on the page.

Marcus leaned forward, studying her list. "Do is spelled D-O. Not D-U."

"Oh." She corrected the word on the parchment.

Marcus nodded. "Of. He. Up. No."

Sage wrote as fast as she could sound the words out. "As."

"Is."

Sage sat back, gazing at the list. "There are so many. And this is probably not all of them." Yet, she was already looking at the words that had the same second letter. "On and An. As, Is. Do, Go. No. At, It." She flipped the parchment over and stared at the first line again.

Marcus picked up the book.

"Z is also the start of the first word," Sage said aloud.

"What letters do we have that the *U* could be?"

Sage turned the parchment over, scanning the list. "Assuming we have all the words, which I am positive we do not, there is *N, S, O, T.*"

Marcus surveyed the list of words on the parchment. His eyes moved back and forth between the book and the list of words. He leaned against her.

His arm was firm. Sage was suddenly aware of how warm he was and how male. She glanced at him inconspicuously. He was so close she could smell pine in his hair.

"I would say *O*. There are many words that end in an *O*."

Sage nodded and put an *O* where the letter *U*'s were in the first line. Then, she grabbed the other parchment piece where she had listed the alphabet and put an *O* next to the *U*.

"What's that?" Marcus asked, pointing to the parchment she wrote on.

"That's the code."

He reached out and took the parchment page from her, studying it.

His hand was large, Sage noted. Firm. Capable. She briefly wondered what it would feel like if she touched it. She scowled and turned to the book. He was becoming a distraction to solving this puzzle. "This *Z*, the first letter..."

He turned his attention back to the first line.

"It is the first letter in the first word and the last letter in these two words." She looked at him. "Which letter could it be?"

Marcus picked up the parchment page where she had listed the two-letter words and scanned them. "*D. G. T.*"

"*To*' is a common word," Sage suggested.

"*T* it is," he agreed with a nod.

She dipped the quill into the ink and put the *T* in the places on the first line she saw the *Z*. She sat back, staring at the first line.

Marcus offered her a piece of bread.

She absently took it, biting off a piece and chewing as she contemplated. "The second line begins with another two-letter word, 'Mu.' According to our guess, that second letter is *O*."

"But it's not 'to' because *Z* is *T*. Do? Fu? Goo? Hu? Loo?"

Sage looked at him in disbelief. "Yes. Loo. This is a book on how best to use the privy. Everyone is searching for this book; people are dying for it—"

He held up his hands in surrender, a breathtaking smile on his lips. "I was just going through the alphabet."

Sage had never seen his genuine smile before. It sent warmth spreading through her body. While she was beginning to admire him

—he was skilled with a sword, and he was smart—she didn't trust him.

"Look here." Marcus pointed to the book. "These words that end in *T* also have the same second-to-last letter."

She looked at the book and nodded.

"Could that be *S*? A lot of words that end in *T* also end in *S-T*."

Lord, she wished she knew how to read. She could sound words out, but this was an entirely different matter.

"Cost. Rest. Must. Test," Marcus mused.

She knew he was guessing, but it made sense. It was better than nothing. She wrote down *S* in place of all the *Y*'s. She sat back and stared at what they had. "To." It was the only word they had deciphered. Maybe.

Marcus grinned, satisfied and proud.

Sage smiled at him. He was still very close to her. Their arms touched, and she felt the heat of his shoulder muscles. And she didn't mind. She liked the way he smelled and the touch and sight of his body. Oh, this was bad. Very bad.

"See this? It's a four-letter word and a five-letter word. Could it be last to first?" Marcus asked, indicating the words.

Sage stared at the letters. He was guessing again, but it was better than not trying. She wrote "last" and then "ferst."

"It's f-i-r-s-t," Marcus corrected her spelling.

"Oh." Sage altered the letters. She had sounded the word out. She couldn't help that it sounded how she wrote it. She began to write in "last" below the first line, in place of the letters.

Marcus stopped her. "Do one letter at a time. Just in case it doesn't work."

She did. The words still all looked foreign to her. She couldn't sound anything out. There were too many letters missing. It made no sense to her. Her mind struggled to solve the puzzle.

Marcus mused, "*T*, *A*, blank, *L*. What could that word be?"

Sage began to work through the alphabet, plugging in letters and saying them in her mind. "Table?"

Marcus looked at her with a frown of suspicion. "Your spelling is atrocious."

She shrugged. "It's not one of my strong points."

His eyes narrowed. "How can you decipher this code if you can't spell?" He straightened. "You do know how to read...don't you?"

Dread sliced through her. "Of course," she lied instinctively, feigning indignation. "How could I figure this out if I can't read?"

"That was the third word you've spelled wrong."

Frustrated because he was right and he had seen through her defenses, Sage gathered the parchment and folded it together. Reading



had always been her weakness. The one thing she wanted more than anything. It just was not viewed as important to the way her family lived. Not as important as sword fighting, or lock picking, or hunting. She shoved the parchment into the book and rose, embarrassed and angry. “So, I am not a perfect speller. That doesn’t mean I can’t read.” Even though she couldn’t.

Marcus stood quickly, holding his hands out in supplication before him. “Sage, I didn’t mean to insult you. I just think decoding is more difficult if you can’t read.”

“You don’t need to read to decode.”

“But...you do.”

Incensed and hurt that her secret was so apparent, and that he had figured it out, she lifted her chin and whirled, marching away toward the tree where the horse was tethered. She would escape tonight. What difference did it make if he knew she couldn’t read?

“Sage!” Marcus called.

She sat down with a harrumph and crossed her arms, closing off communication. Imagine! Him accusing her of not being able to read. How humiliating. How embarrassing. How correct.

She and Marcus had been making progress on the black book. Then, he had accused her of not being able to read. Of course, he was right. She couldn’t read. She could only read two-letter words—and what good was that? She could sound some of the others out. Usually. Apparently, not well enough to fool him or to decode the book.

Upset and ashamed, she refused to look at him. She had always wanted to read. It had been a fierce desire inside her to know why. And books gave answers. And knowledge. She had begged her father to find someone to teach her, but it wasn’t important to him. She always felt like an outcast among her family because she thought learning to read *was* important. She always felt Willow and Raven were laughing at her for her desire to read.

Oh, what was the use? Marcus was right! He had kidnapped someone to decode the book who couldn’t even read. She rose, frustrated. “So, I can’t read. What difference does that make? I can sword fight. I can pick any lock you give me. I can figure out any puzzle.” She held the book out to him. “Like this book. It doesn’t matter if I can’t read. I can sound words out. And I can certainly decode this book.”

Marcus approached her.

She fumed silently, her teeth clenched, and her fist balled, but her feelings were shattered. Her lower lip trembled with hurt embarrassment.

“I only asked because...I can teach you.”

Her anger evaporated, and she lowered the book. “You know how

to read.” It was a statement. She knew he did. He had been offering suggestions to decode the book and correcting her spelling.

He nodded. “Yes.”

She looked him up and down, from his tight-fitting black breeches to over his strong chest to his full lips that were not smiling in mockery of her. She swallowed. “Why would you teach me?” she demanded suspiciously.

He shrugged those strong shoulders. “For one, it would help you decode that book faster.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. That would make sense. He wanted the book decoded. Teaching her to read would benefit them both.

Still, misplaced righteous anger simmered in her veins. She thoughtfully chewed her lower lip. He had said he would teach her to read! Hunger at the prospect filled her. The one thing she had wanted for her entire life. Raven was always better than her at sword fighting. Willow was the pretty one. Sage could work puzzles, but it wasn’t enough. “I suppose you’re right.”

“If I teach you, there is one thing I want from you.”

She knew it—there was always a catch. She put her hand on her hip, waiting.

“I want your word you will not attempt to escape.”

She blinked. That was it? Just her word? She could give him that. Joy erupted inside her, but then quickly faded. What about her family? She needed to find them and let them know she was safe. They would be searching for her. They would be worried. But everything inside her wanted to learn to read. She could always locate her family after she had learned and apologize for making them worry. Once she explained that she could read, they would have to understand. They would forgive her for making them fret over her safety.

He took a step toward her. “I can’t watch you every moment of the day. I want to be able to trust you.”

Ironical of him to ask for trust. “How can I trust you? You killed Brother Nicolas, an unarmed innocent man. How do I know once I decode this book that you won’t kill me, too?”

His gaze swept over her.

And for a moment, she thought she saw remorse and sadness. His shoulders sagged, and he bowed his head. But then, it was gone.

“I won’t kill you,” he promised in a flat voice.

She stared at him, trying to decipher the truth. She really had no choice. Her desire to read was a craving inside her. She wanted to learn to read more than anything else. To do that, she had to give him her word. She nodded. “I won’t try to escape until we’ve deciphered the book.”

Marcus agreed. "That's good enough." He turned his back and walked away.

Hope surged through her. He was going to teach her to read. Sage's gaze dropped to his rounded bottom as he strolled away. She had to admire his physique, even if she didn't admire his murderous personality.

He was no threat. She could take care of herself. And he would teach her to read!

# Chapter 10

**A**fter riding the next day, they stopped for the night in a thick area of the forest. Marcus reached inside the saddlebag and pulled out a loaf. He got tired of eating bread all the time, but it was easy to carry on journeys. He broke it in half and handed one piece to Sage. Then, he pulled the flask out and uncorked it, passing it to Sage.

She took it and drank before handing it back. "Will you teach me to read now?"

Marcus grinned and picked up a stick. She was very determined. He set the flask on the ground and squatted down, etching words into the dirt. "This shan't be hard."

And it wasn't. She knew the alphabet already, and she knew many of the two-letter words. He explained to her about the sounds the letters made, but she knew that, too. He moved on to simple sentences.

She was a fast learner. Eager. He was becoming intrigued at how her mind worked like a sponge. She wanted to soak in all the information he gave her. Not only was she beautiful, but she was intelligent and curious.

After a while, he set the branch down. "That's enough for now."

She scowled in disapproval and, with a sigh of resignation, dipped her hand into her armor and pulled out the book. She returned to the horse and opened one of the saddlebags.

Marcus knew she was retrieving the quill and ink. They would try to decode the book for a little bit before sleeping.

She pulled something out of the bag and stopped, staring at it in surprise.

Tingles danced along the nape of Marcus's neck. He stood quickly and moved to her side.

"What's this?" Sage asked, presenting him with a small cloth doll. A piece of fabric had been tied to form a body, head, and arms.

Marcus grabbed it from her hand and shoved it back into the saddlebag. "Nothing."

"It didn't look like nothing," she accused. "It looked like a doll."

"Forget about it," Marcus ordered. "Do you want to decipher the book or not?"

Her mouth dropped in surprise before she closed it, shrugging.

Marcus found the quill and ink in the saddlebag and presented

them to her. His tone might have been a little harsh, but she certainly didn't need to know about the doll—the doll he had purchased for Rose.

He pushed the incident to the back of his mind and helped her decode for a while, suggesting words and ideas. But he was no expert at decoding.

Finally, he sat beneath a tree. He was exhausted from the day's riding and needed to rest. He settled in, his back to the trunk and his sword within reach. He had to stay ready for anything. He knew others were after the book, and he knew he had to maintain his strength and stamina. His gaze scanned the forest.

He recalled one of the times he had been in a forest, watching. His gaze had been riveted on a small cottage with a thatched roof in the middle of farm fields. He had waited for hours in the brush before his sister, Emma, emerged from the house into the sunlight. Her blonde hair was tied back in a bun. She had picked up an empty bucket beside the cottage, as Marcus knew she would. She looked into it and pulled out the coin pouch he had left. She stared at it for a moment before whirling, her gaze searching the surrounding countryside. Marcus knew she couldn't see him; he was well hidden behind trunks of trees and thick bushes.

She tied the pouch to her belt and set the bucket down before hurrying inside the cottage. He remembered the satisfaction that had filled him at giving her the coin. He wished it could have been more.

Then, Emma reemerged. His breathing had hitched as though he had gasped. He would never forget that image of her holding a two-year-old girl on her hip.

*Rose.* It was the only thing he had given the child. Her name.

He mentally shook himself. It did no good to remember. He looked across the clearing at Sage to distract himself. She was leaning against a tree; her head slumped to the side in sleep. She must be as exhausted as he was.

He stood and moved to her. He stared down at her for a long moment. The moonlight washed over her peaceful face. He closed the book and eased it from her grasp to place it beside her, knowing she would panic if she couldn't find it. Then, he took a blanket from beside her and spread it over her.

She turned her head with a contented sigh.

He grinned, and his gaze hungrily swept her face—her smooth skin, her high cheekbones, her full lips. He quickly turned and stalked across the clearing to his spot beneath one of the elm trees. He was thankful he didn't have to worry about Sage attempting to escape. She had given him her word. He sat down, leaned back against the tree, and closed his eyes.

Guillume was again before him, pacing. "I have charged you with retrieving the book, and you take time to teach this girl to read?"

"I sent you word. I will rendezvous with you at our meeting spot. I will hand over the book then. You have nothing to worry about," Marcus said. "I will not betray you."

"Betray?" Guillume smiled. "I said nothing about betrayal. What are you thinking?"

Marcus jerked awake. The sun shone through the leaves of the trees, speckling the forest floor in shadow and light. What were these nightmares he kept having? He blinked and immediately looked for Sage. The spot she had occupied last night was empty. The leaves pressed down in her form where she had rested. He searched the area for her, anxiety clenching his stomach. But before his mind could muster any accusations, he spotted her. She was pacing with the book in her hands, mumbling to herself.

Marcus grinned and took a moment to watch her. She was slender. Her brown hair had been worked into a braid again at her back and fell to her bottom—a curvy, delicious bottom visible beneath her leather armor. Black breeches covered her long, slender legs to her black boots. His gaze moved up over her perfectly shaped breasts to her face.

She whirled, stalking across the clearing. A frown etched into the spot between her brows. She was persistent. It was one of the features he liked about her.

His horse whinnied, and she glanced up, locking gazes with him.

Caught, he quickly glanced away and stood.

She approached him. "Is there time to teach me to read before we ride?"

She was anxious to learn. It was a good thing—something to bind her to him. "After we eat, we'll ride. When we rest, I'll continue teaching you."

"You can't start now?"

He grinned. "Not now. We shouldn't remain here." He walked to the horse and bent to one of the bags on the ground. He pulled out a flask and took a deep drink of ale. He sloshed the liquid in his mouth and spat it out on the ground. He held the flask out to her.

She waved it away, her interest returning to the book.

*Tenacious.* Her determination with the book gave him another chance to look at her. Her lips were full and pursed in thought. Her brow was furrowed in concentration. She was very beautiful. He shook his head. It didn't matter how beautiful she was. She had to decipher that book. And soon. Time was running out.

She glanced up at him, catching his stare. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to follow the Ruisseau du Carla."



After half a day riding, Marcus dismounted and led the horse along a stream. He had traveled this route before to avoid the public roads and any encounters. This path was the perfect route to evade Sterling and the Templar knights.

Sage sat before him on the horse, peering into the open book. She had been distracted on their ride. He had remained quiet to let her think. It gave him time to plan and to ponder, which could be a dangerous thing.

His mind wandered back to Rose. The last time he had seen her was in Emma's arms. Before that was when she was a baby. A little, crying baby that he had held in his arms as he rode through the night to Emma's cottage. The child had not stopped wailing the entire way; her high-pitched screeches had echoed through the darkness. He knew he could not keep her because he had no idea how to comfort her, let alone raise a baby. But Emma did. She would make a perfect mother. And she had just lost her baby during childbirth. A more fitting situation, there could not have been.

When he arrived, Emma opened the door for him. Her husband, Ross, stood just behind her with that eternal disapproving glare. Without any questions, Emma took the baby, cocooning it in love. Rose had stopped screaming instantly.

And for a moment, for one brief moment, Marcus had longed to raise the child himself and be a father.

That had been three years ago. And he had done everything in his power to support the child. He gave most of the coin he made to Emma, even though Ross had forbidden him from returning. Ross could not forgive him for abandoning the babe. But nothing Ross said to him could compare with the guilt Marcus felt.

He forced his thoughts from the child and his sister. All his love, everything he cared about, was in that cottage far away from him. As it should be.

This mission offered him the chance to make significant coin for the child and Emma.

He thought about the mission, the book. That damned infernal book. What was in it? It didn't matter, except that he was curious. Guillume had offered him a lot of coin to retrieve it. He was hoping that if he decoded the book, Guillume would give him even more coin. And he could give every schilling to Emma.

Still, why was the book worth so much? What was in it?

"Do you have a child?" Sage suddenly asked, breaking the silence.

“Why do you ask?” he wondered, avoiding the question.

“Because of the doll.”

He considered her question in silence, deliberating whether he should tell her or not. “Yes,” he finally admitted. “But I am not raising her.”

Sage twisted in the saddle to look at him. “Why?”

“I can’t raise a child with the life I lead,” he admitted. “I’m a mercenary. I work for coin. There are days I don’t know where my next meal is coming from. I would never subject a child to that.”

Sage was silent, considering his answer. Strands of her hair had come free of the braid she wore and bounced gently with the movement of the horse. “My father did exactly that. He came to get us when my mother died. We used to hunt and fish when he didn’t have coin to buy our next meal.”

“Are you saying I am wrong?” he asked, indignant.

“Is she with her mother?”

Marcus shook his head, trying not to show his disdain. “No.”

“Where is she? Who is raising her?”

“My sister,” Marcus admitted. “Rose is happy and healthy.”

“But she doesn’t have her father.”

The familiar guilt weighed heavily on his shoulders, and he clenched his jaw.

“Where is her mother?” Sage asked.

Marcus shook his head as he thought of Cassandra. Beautiful. Vain. He had believed he had loved her. “She didn’t want her.”

Sage’s lips tightened in disapproval. “And you took your daughter to your sister to raise?”

Marcus nodded.

“How old is she?” Sage asked.

“Three summers,” Marcus said softly, longingly.

She turned in the saddle to look at his face.

Marcus knew he had given away too much. His desire to see his daughter, his remorse at having someone else raise her. “She might be mine, but she has a different father. My sister’s husband.” As Sage opened her mouth to reply, he cut her off with a stern tone, “It is for the best.”



# Chapter 11

**T**hey rode the rest of the day in silence until the sun began to set. Sage concentrated on the book, not the sorrow in Marcus's voice when he spoke of his daughter, not on the way his strong arms wrapped around her to hold the horse's reins, and certainly not on the way his thighs caressed hers.

As the sun began its descent, Marcus pulled the horse into a clearing near the stream. "We'll rest here for the night."

Sage looked up from the parchment at the surroundings. Trees lined the small open area, sheltering and secluding it. As Marcus dismounted, brushing against her shoulder, prickles danced along the nape of her neck. Odd. She shouldn't be thinking of him like this. He wasn't an honorable man; financially taking care of his daughter didn't overrule that he had killed Brother Nicolas in cold blood.

She slid from the horse, clutching the book. She had to remember he was a killer.

The sun was dipping low, spreading red and pink wafts through the sky. It didn't give her much time to decode. She quickly removed the quill and ink from the bags before strolling to a tree. She crossed her legs, sitting down with the open book. Her gaze rose to Marcus, who removed the bags, cared for the horse, and checked its hooves.

Sage watched him for a moment. His movements were reined power. His back was straight with confidence.

A distraction—that was what he was. She opened the book and couldn't help casting another glance at him. When she saw he was working a stone from the horse's hoof, she slipped the parchment from her boot, turned to the last page of the book, and made sure she had copied it correctly. She went over the letters on the page, working diligently to make sure it was accurate. She cast secretive glances at Marcus. So very handsome.

Sage worked as rapidly and as precisely as she could. If she got even one letter wrong, it could spell catastrophe.

She pulled out the other parchment pieces and spread them on the ground beside the copy in case Marcus came over. She could use them to cover the replica of the book.

She paused in her work as guilt made her doubt her actions. She looked at Marcus as he lifted the horse's leg from the ground. She should feel no loyalty toward him, even if he was teaching her to

read. She would decode the book with him or without him. Either way, she would have answers.

He held the horse's leg between his knees and used a dagger to work a rock from the horse's hoof. His blond hair was streaked with light from the setting sun. His forest-green tunic was tight over his biceps. She sighed softly.

Scowling fiercely, she dragged her attention back to the book. What was wrong with her?

As he finished up with the horse's hooves, Sage blew on the ink to dry it. Then, watching him as he led the horse to the stream, she folded the parchment copy of the book and slipped it back into her boot.

She glanced down at the book and then the coded parchment beside it. Some words made sense, but others not at all. She heard Marcus come up to her, the leaves crunching beneath his booted feet.

She glanced up at him. "Will you teach me to read?"

He smiled. "We should decode the book for a bit, and then I will teach you."

She nodded and turned back to the book.

Marcus sat beside her.

"I was thinking..." Sage mused. "If we knew what the book was about, perhaps it would be easier to find words that fit the structure."

Marcus was silent, contemplating. "It could be about anything, but..."

She shifted her full attention to him. Did he know more about what secrets were hidden in the book's pages than he was saying?

"If I had to guess, I would say it was about the Templar treasure."

Sage looked down at the parchment pages in surprise. *Treasure?* Anxiety peppered her skin.

"It could be a list of all of the treasures. Or where it's hidden. Or what it is. Gold. The Ark of the Covenant. Spells."

For the first time, Sage realized how much trouble this book could cause her. "Spells?" she echoed.

"There are rumors the Templars used dark magic to hide the treasure."

Sage shook her head. "The Templars? The knights who work for God? The *Christian* knights endorsed by the church? I don't believe they would use spells, especially dark magic."

"Maybe. And maybe, they are not as holy as everyone believes. Either way, we should keep an open mind when deciphering it."

Together, they worked on the book. Like the night before, Marcus gave her some ideas and suggestions. They both hunched over the book, Sage on her knees and Marcus sitting cross-legged beside her. His knee rested against her thigh, and for some reason, shivers

climbed up her body. For a moment, she was distracted by his knee. The gentle brush and warm pressure sent heat flaring through her. Her breathing came in short gasps, and she wasn't certain if it was her excitement at decoding the book or...

She looked at Marcus. His hair was cut short, but his locks were full and curling at his nape. His chiseled jawline was grizzled with a day's growth and in need of a shave. His nose was straight and proud. He shifted his eyes to her. Blue. Like the sky. Her gaze dropped to his lips.

Oh, she wanted to kiss him.

A group of birds exploded from the trees next to them.

Sage's mind was foggy, but every instinct she had reacted. Her hand dropped to the pommel of her sword and her body tensed.

Marcus saw her reaction and swung his head toward the trees where the birds had flown from.

His movement was enough to snap Sage from her reverie. She shot to her feet as Marcus drew his blade.

Four men burst from the cover of the trees and bushes, rushing toward them, swords drawn. They wore white tunics emblazoned with the red crosses of the Templar knights.

Marcus stepped forward as if to protect Sage, intercepting the blow of the first knight. She would have been insulted, but she had no time.

Marcus blocked swings from the first two knights, and Sage moved to his side to join him, crossing swords with one of the others. She was quick, blocking first an arcing blow and then a swing. When another knight attacked her, her instincts took over. Her father had taught her and her sisters well, insisting on daily practices. It was second nature to her to fight. But she had never been as good as Raven.

Now, fighting for her life, it didn't matter. She spun out of the way of a swinging blow and blocked the second knight's arc. She kicked the other one back as he raised his blade over his head. She was taught to fight with everything she had; her feet, elbows, and even her head could be weapons. She lunged, shoving the blade into the first knight's stomach. She was shocked for a moment when it entered. She had expected it to glance off of armor beneath his tunic.

She couldn't dwell on the fact. She had to finish the other one. She pulled her sword free and sidestepped the second knight's lunge. He added a hard punch across her cheek that she was unprepared for. It sent her flying to the ground. Her sword spun from her grip.

Her mind whirled from the blow. Her father would not be pleased. Her sword was an arm's reach away. She could hear her father saying, "If you lose your sword, you're dead." Fallen leaves crunched behind her—the knight was approaching. She waited until he was close enough before plowing plowed her foot into his knee. He cried out in

pain.

She lurched toward her weapon. Her hand closed around the pommel of her sword and she rolled onto her back, holding the tip of the blade up.

The knight loomed over her, bringing his blade down, leaning forward into his blow.

Sage shoved her weapon up and, as his sword came down, she moved her head to the side, narrowly avoiding the blade.

Time seemed to stop with the knight looming over her like a canopy. She half-expected him to pull out a dagger and continue fighting. Only when blood dripped from the corner of his lips did she relax and push him off her. He tumbled limply to the ground at her side.

“Sage!” Marcus called, his voice distressed.

She turned her head, and her hair snagged, preventing her movement. “I’m okay,” she assured, lifting her hand to check what was holding her hair down. It was the knight’s long blade, impaled in the ground on her braid.

Marcus ran over to her, his concerned gaze sweeping her. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Sage answered, trying to tug her hair free. She stopped and shifted her gaze to him. “Are you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

Sage continued pulling at her locks to free her hair. She reached up to grasp the handle of the sword but couldn’t work up enough force to pull it from the ground. “I’m stuck.”

Marcus walked to the sword and yanked it from the ground. He tossed it aside and dropped to his knees beside her.

She sat up, staring at him. That was close. That blade had missed her throat by inches. Father would not be pleased. She rubbed her neck to make sure she wasn’t cut.

Marcus’s jaw dropped open in shock.

“What?” Sage demanded. Was she bleeding? Her hand moved over her neck, across her jaw. There was no injury, no blood. “What?” Her cheek stung from the blow, but there was no wound.

He glanced at the ground. “I hope you’ve always wanted short hair.” He picked something up and held it out to her.

The twisted lock of hair swung back and forth in his fingers.

For a moment, Sage gaped in confusion at it. Her braid! Slowly, dread spread through her, and she lifted her hand to touch the top of her head, running her fingers down the strands to the ends. Some strands were longer, but most were cut off at her shoulders. Her hair had used to go down to her waist. That was why she braided it—so it wouldn’t get in the way of her sword fighting.

Now, her hair stopped just above her shoulders. Stunned, she couldn't look away from the braid in Marcus's fingers, and she couldn't stop feeling for the length that used to extend beyond her shoulders. All three of the Hawke sisters had long hair. What would her father say?

The thought sent dread through her again.

Her father would say that was too close of an encounter. She had been careless. She bowed her head under his imagined chastisement. And then, he would say never to mind her hair. She was alive. Instead, she should figure out who these knights were.

"Are you well?" Marcus asked with sympathy, lowering the braid to place it on the ground.

Sage nodded. Her father was right. She stood and looked around at the two knights near her, and the other two Marcus had slain lying steps away. "I'm alive. You're alive. Hair doesn't matter. These men wanted to kill us." She stood over one, her gaze coming to rest on the crimson stain spreading across his white tunic and on the red cross on his chest. Templar knights. But were they, really?

Her eyes narrowed. "These men are not Templar knights."

Marcus glanced at them. "They wear the crest of the order."

Sage bent and lifted the knight's white tunic to reveal a brown tunic beneath. "They were disguised as Templar knights. But he wears no armor. This man is no knight."

Marcus moved to the two other men he had slain. He knelt at one's side and peeled back the man's tunic. "No armor on this one, either."

Sage stared down at the man she had killed. His dark hair lay across the weed-covered ground. His eyes were open and glassy, blood trickling from his lips. It must be because of the book. That was the only thing they had of importance that was worth killing over. Wasn't it? She looked at Marcus. His hands skimmed the body of the fallen man, searching. How much did she truly know about him? Could someone want to kill him for another reason? Or was it an enemy of her father?

She glanced back at the man on the ground. But why were they disguised... Who would want to frame Templar knights? A sudden chill of realization ran down her spine.

The king.

It was rumored that the king owed the Templar knights a huge sum of coin, and he did not like how powerful they had become. Still, this was sloppy, as if it were organized quickly. Surely, the king would have been able to send more skilled men, or at least men who wore armor. Sage doubted it could have been the king.

Marcus cast a glance at the surrounding forest. "We should leave here and find another place to rest for the night."

Sage nodded, her gaze scanning the darkening woods. She quickly moved to the book and collected the parchment, ink, and quill. She placed the book in her armor and put the ink and quill in the saddlebags by the horse.

Marcus searched the men, removing daggers, coins, and anything else of value.

Sage glanced again at the four deceased false Templar knights. Who were these men? Had the king truly hired them? Who would want to kill them?

What had she gotten into?

# Chapter 12

**M**arcus thought the pursuers had simply backtracked and rode following them. Who would want to kill them? This had to be about the book; there was no other explanation.

When he was convinced that they were safe and no one was trailing them, he stopped the horse near the stream. A small clearing surrounded by thick trees offered them a hidden spot to rest. The tall trees at the edge of the stream would shelter them. They would hear attackers sloshing across the stream. There would be no element of surprise.

Sage slid from the horse, and he dismounted. He tethered the steed to a tree.

“We should take turns on watch,” Sage suggested.

“I don’t think we were followed,” Marcus assured. Guilt weighed heavily on Marcus’s shoulders every time he happened a glance at Sage, which was often. Her short hair was a testament to how close she had come to losing her life. The blame built, brick upon brick inside of him, weighing him down. She shouldn’t be here. It wasn’t worth endangering her life. He still had to admit that without her help, the men would have most likely overpowered him, taken the book, and killed him. She had helped to defeat the four attackers.

He took a deep breath as he removed the saddlebags from the horse. It was that damned book. So many people were hunting for it. Sterling. The real Knights Templar. And now...the mysterious attackers who had been dressed as Knights Templar.

He looked at Sage. She stood by one of the trees, the leather-bound book in her hand. She was always trying to decode it; always had the book in front of her. And yet...she couldn’t read. She certainly could sound words out. But it would be difficult and time-consuming to put sentences together and even more difficult for her to decipher the book.

The more he thought about the fact that Sage could not read, the more convinced he was that she would take too long to decode the book. At the chateau, he had overheard her and Nicolas talking. But it was clear he had misheard. Sage was not a decoding expert.

If she couldn’t read, if she couldn’t decipher the book, then she was of no use to him. He tried to ignore the remorse swirling inside of

him at the sight of her chopped locks. He didn't want to drag her across the countryside if he didn't have to. Not with so many after him and the book. Marcus glanced over his shoulder at Sage. She held the book before her, her lips moving in silent rhythm as she sounded words out.

He knew what he had to do. He took a deep breath in preparation and looked at Sage. Her pert little nose was buried in the book. One would think that after the confrontation, she would be scanning the forest for attackers. "Sage."

She glanced up in a daze and then blinked, coming to her senses. She approached him, her curvy hips swaying with her steps. "Will you teach me?"

Stunned, Marcus stared at her for a moment. It was as if being attacked by killers was an everyday occurrence for her. Her uneven locks, shorter on one side than the other, only added more resolve to Marcus's conviction. He looked down at the saddlebags in his hand. "You are free to go."

Surprise washed over her features before a scowl settled on her brow. She glanced around at the forest and then pinned him with a confused, angry gaze. "But you haven't taught me how to read."

This was for the best, Marcus reminded himself. He would not take responsibility for her. He didn't want her hurt because of him. He licked his lips and gazed at the book, holding his hand out for it.

She retreated, pulling it protectively against her chest. "You promised to teach me to read."

Marcus lowered his hand and lifted his chin. "I made the promise under false circumstances."

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Have you ever decoded a book?"

Her frown deepened. "What does that have to do with your promise?" she demanded.

"When I kidnapped you, when I made the promise to teach you to read, it was under the assumption you had decoded before."

"Are you saying you don't think I can do it?" she demanded.

Marcus tried to remain calm. Couldn't she see he was doing this to keep her safe? "I'm saying you can't read. That will make deciphering the book difficult."

Her brows drew down harshly, angrily, over her eyes. "You don't think I can do it," she insisted.

"Sage," he pleaded.

"You don't think I can decode the book," she accused with a clenched jaw.

"Not right now," he admitted.

She went silent. Her composure wavered with hurt. He saw it in



her eyes, in the small quiver of her chin. The sudden need to comfort her washed over him.

He fought the urge and tried to explain, "I think in the future you probably could—"

"Don't," Sage snapped. She straightened her shoulders. "I can do it now. You're making a huge mistake."

He shrugged in agreement. "Probably." He held his hand out for the book.

"Your daughter is lucky to be with someone else, someone who doesn't blatantly break their promises," she said harshly.

Her words were barbed and hit home. They were a repeat of his own opinions that had echoed in his mind. He knew she only said it to hurt him. And it did. He thrust his hand out to her, demanding the book.

"I thought you wanted to decode this book. I thought you wanted to know what it said, why your cousin wanted it so badly."

She was right. He did. But she couldn't do it.

"I do," he admitted. "But that doesn't change anything."

"Then let me finish. Let me work on it. Give me a couple of days," she pleaded.

He shook his head and held his hand out firmly.

Her shoulders sagged. She reluctantly handed him the book.

He took it and a stab of regret sliced through him. Ridiculous regret. He knew he was right in this matter.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why are you doing this?"

She deserved to know the truth. He couldn't give her the entire truth. It would be insulting to her if he told her he was doing it to keep her safe. She was a Hawke. She didn't need protecting. "I saw real Templars in the last village," he admitted.

"Templar knights?" she repeated. Her gaze traveled over his face.

"They are searching for me, for the book. If I am caught, I don't want you punished for my actions."

She chuckled. "I wouldn't be." She crossed her arms. "Remember, you were the one who kidnapped me. You were the one who killed Brother Nicolas. Don't worry. I'll tell them the truth."

He sighed softly. "Your family is also tracking us."

Sage turned and glanced over her shoulder as if she expected them to appear from the forest. "How do you know?"

He gazed at her in disbelief. She knew they were. Why deny it?

She shifted uneasily.

There was something suspicious in her movement. He stared at her warily for a moment. "You know they are."

She nodded. "Probably."

"Definitely."

She reluctantly nodded again. "I'm surprised they haven't found us already."

"What do you think they will do when they find us?"

A grin spawned over her lovely lips. "Skin you alive."

"Another reason for me to free you."

She cocked her head to the side. "Are you afraid of them?"

"Not afraid," he insisted. "Just hesitant to meet them."

Sage's amusement faded, and she stared at him in anguish. "You promised to teach me to read."

There was agony and desperation in her words. But he could not give in. "That was before I knew you couldn't decode." He nodded and turned toward the horse, placing the book in one of the saddlebags.

Sage seized his arm. "Please," she whispered. "I can decode that book, even without knowing how to read. I can do it. I know I can."

Marcus's heart tugged. "If I had more time, perhaps. But this is not a game. Men are willing to kill for it." He flung the saddlebag over his shoulder, and headed for the horse.

"I've decoded another word."

Marcus missed a step, stopping. His interest was piqued. Without being able to read, she had decoded another word. Could he be wrong? Maybe she had the skill. If the book were decoded, Guillaume might reward him with more coin, more coin he could give to Emma and Rose. He turned to her. "What word?"

She lifted her chin but remained silent.

Marcus swore softly.

"You want to know what it says as much as I do," Sage said softly. "You have nothing to lose by teaching me to read. I won't try to run away. I will help you decode the book. We work together well."

Marcus hesitated again. He was safer alone. He always had been. *She* was safer without him. He didn't want to be responsible for her. Yet, it was because of her that he was alive. Four men had attacked him. If she hadn't been there...

"I'll protect you against my family," Sage offered with a smile.

Marcus grinned. "If they find us."

"They'll find us."

Yes, they most likely would. He turned and looked at the swaying branches of the trees and bushes as if the answer lay there. "Why would you willingly travel with me? I kidnapped you. I killed Brother Nicolas. Four assassins attacked us. Do you want to read that badly?"

"Yes," Sage admitted. She took a deep breath, rolled her eyes, and added, "Plus, I want to know what secret that book holds. Besides, you didn't really kidnap me. I could have gotten away from you."

"You tried." He rubbed his jaw at the memory of her kick.

Sage shrugged. "Once. I could have kept trying, but you promised

to teach me to read.” She narrowed her eyes slightly, appraising him. “The only thing that bothers me about you is how you killed Brother Nicolas. He was unarmed. It was a brutal thing to do.”

Marcus bowed his head, his lips clenched. It bothered him, too. “I didn’t mean to kill him.”

# Chapter 13

**S**hocked, Sage stared at him. “I saw you do it. You ran him through.”

Marcus shook his head, and waves of his blond hair swayed with the movement. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I was turning, and he lunged for the book.” He gazed thoughtfully, remorsefully at the dirt ground. “I would have bound him and left him. I would have been long gone before he told anyone I took the book. He posed no threat.”

She played the scene over in her mind. Could it be as he said? Now, without the filter of hate and disbelief, she saw exactly what had happened. Brother Nicolas had jerked forward as Marcus whirled. Marcus hadn’t moved his arm forward for the death lunge. He hadn’t meant to run Nicolas through. It was as Marcus had said. Nicolas was old, and he presented no danger to him. Sage had crossed swords with Marcus. She knew how good he was. If he had meant to kill Brother Nicolas, he would have done it.

“It was a mistake,” he insisted. “I tracked Sterling to le Bezu. As I was moving to intercept him to take the book, I overheard you and Nicolas.”

Her mind whirled. “Sterling? You mean Christian?”

He nodded.

“Christian was at le Bezu?” What was going on? Why would both Christian and her father be at the chateau?

Marcus nodded. “I had meant to confront him and procure the book, but I heard you and Brother Nicolas decoding it.”

Guilt settled around Sage’s shoulders. They hadn’t been decoding the book. Brother Nicolas was teaching her *how* to decode.

“Now I know you were being taught to solve the puzzle. I realize I was wrong.” Marcus looked up at her. “I never meant to hurt him.”

There was truth and anguish in his voice, and Sage felt a tug of sympathy.

He chuckled mockingly. “This probably taints the villainous image you have of me.”

She stepped closer to him. “Maybe a little,” she admitted. “But for the better.”

He shook his head. “He was old. We weren’t friends, but that didn’t mean I had to use force on him.”

His blue eyes were full of regret and something else. Something

that called to her like a beacon. Her gaze swept his handsome, rugged face lined with agony, finally coming to rest on his tortured eyes. She placed a hand on his smooth cheek for comfort. She was not good at comforting, but it didn't seem to matter. She wanted to touch him, to soothe him. Her gaze lingered on his lips. Such torment. Such remorse. She just wanted to...wanted to...

Without thinking, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, giving him a gentle kiss. His lips were warm and firm. Heat exploded through her, terrifying her.

She pulled back and dropped her hand from his skin. "I'm sorry. I \_\_\_"

Marcus dropped the saddlebag and cupped her face, pulling her lips back to his.

Her curiosity was overwhelmed by the hunger in his kiss, leaving her powerless to do anything but respond. He moved his mouth expertly over hers, igniting a sudden fire in her stomach. She was swept away by the force of his need and her own. She responded eagerly, closing her eyes and answering his kiss. His lips were gentle as they caressed hers. She threaded her fingers through his hair.

He drew her tight against his hard body, wrapping his arms about her. He kissed her lips, his tongue moving delicately over them, coaxing her to open to his exploration.

Sage parted her lips with a soft sigh.

He thrust his tongue forward, sweeping it through her mouth.

Startled, she pulled back. Her lips tingled from his kiss. Willow had told her stories about kissing, but she had never experienced it before. She quickly stepped away from him, separating from the warmth of his body.

Marcus's brow furrowed in confusion, and then, his mouth opened in surprise, realization dawning in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't think \_\_\_"

She quickly shook her head. "Don't apologize. I started it." She had been unprepared for the searing heat that he had ignited inside of her. She had been unprepared for the depth of the kiss, even though Willow had told her. She had just...wanted to know what he felt like, what his kiss would taste like, what *he* would taste like.

"Then we both are at fault," he admitted.

He was being kind. Embarrassed, she wondered if she had kissed wrong. She wasn't sure since it was the first time that she had ever kissed a man. She searched for something comforting, something she was familiar with. "Can I have the book back?" she asked.

Marcus's gaze swept her.

"Since we are working together," she added.

He hesitated for a moment. "You must promise me one thing."

Her stare brushed his face from his eyes to his lips. A tremor swept through her.

“You have to promise that if there is trouble, you will run,” he urged.

“Run?” she asked with distaste and abhorrence.

“Either that or we cannot work together.”

Sage paused for a long moment. Running away from battle was not the Hawke way. They were taught to stay and fight. Still, she would agree to anything in order to decode the book. And to learn to read.

And to remain with Marcus.

The last part shocked her. But, reluctantly she nodded. “Even though I don’t like it, I’ll agree.”

Marcus bobbed his head and reached in the saddlebag to pull out the book. He handed it to her.

She took the book, staring down at its black leather cover. It was safer for her to stay rooted in learning and deciphering. In knowledge. She wasn’t like Willow. She wasn’t pretty. She didn’t like the attention of men. She had only wanted to know what a kiss felt like. What *Marcus’s* kiss felt like.

And now she knew. The only problem was it had awakened another level of curiosity in her. If his kiss could make her feel so heated, what could his touch do?

I might have agreed to run, she thought slyly, but I will not stop leaving a trail for my sisters to find me. Even though she enjoyed his kiss, and he was teaching her to read, she didn’t trust him. She placed a hand over the pocket in her breeches where she kept the ripped-up pieces of parchment.

# Chapter 14

**The moon was high overhead when Marcus** finally continued teaching Sage to read. It cast muted light over them as he scribbled letters into the dirt. He concentrated on teaching her sentences and putting words she knew together. After that, they worked a little on decoding the book.

Now, he sat against a tree across from Sage. She stared off into the distance, the book wrapped in her arms. Occasionally, she lifted her gaze to him. He knew he should be concentrating on their attackers, on trying to figure out who they were and if there were more of them coming.

Sage had kissed him. He couldn't get the thought from his mind. She had pressed her soft lips to his. And his response had been instantaneous. Desire had pounded through his veins. Yet, he knew by her reaction to the kiss that she was innocent. No man had kissed her as he had. The thought was intoxicating.

He mentally shook himself. He had to think of something else.

Her legs were bent, and she hugged the book protectively. His gaze roamed slowly over her body. Firm and yet curvy. He had felt her curves against his form, his arms around her, pulling her to him. Even now, heat churned in the pit of his stomach, a heat that demanded he go to her and kiss her again.

His eyes moved leisurely over her knees and down her legs. He licked his lips. He wondered if he tilted his head if he could see between her legs. He shook himself. She had breeches on! Good heavens, he thought.

His plan for the upcoming days, he reminded himself. Yes. Think of that. Rest for the night in the forest. Then, find the cave he had discovered near the stream as a child. Hopefully, they could rest a day there, where he would spend part of the time teaching her to read and part of the time making love to her delectable body. He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. He meant, part of the time deciphering the book. Then, they would head to the town of Les Labadous where he would meet Guillume at the inn near the border.

They could ride the horse together, and he could feel her delectable bottom...

He ground his teeth. He would meet Guillume near the border. And then, he and Sage could go off, and he could explore her body the way he wanted to.

He felt his cock shift. He expelled a breath through clenched teeth and altered his position, recrossing his legs. Think of something else. Focus, Marcus warned himself. He opened his eyes. Something poked him in the back, and he reached behind him to grasp the item. A small twig. He twirled it in his fingers.

Oh, how he wanted to gather her into his arms and taste her lips again.

He gritted his teeth and tossed the stick aside. The book. Yes, he was thinking about decoding it. He would hand the book over to Guillume regardless of whether they had deciphered it or not. He hoped that together, he and Sage could crack the code. Guillume would be so surprised that Marcus had brought it to him decoded. Guillume would shower riches and gold upon him. Rose would never want for anything.

His little Rose. He didn't even know what she looked like. He knew she had blonde hair, but she had been too far away in Emma's arms to see her truly. He wished he could hold her. But then he recoiled at the thought. He remembered her piercing cries as he rode through the night.

As much as he longed to be a present father to her, he knew that could never happen. It would have to be enough to leave the coin. It would have to be enough that another man was raising her. The fact that Ross was bringing up his daughter grated his nerves. Yet he was grateful and hoped Ross treated her like his own. He hoped Ross loved her as Emma did.

No one but Emma and Ross knew that Rose was his. And of course, Cassandra, Marcus thought bitterly. But he knew she would never care for Rose or him. Marcus had often thought of confiding in Guillume about Rose, but he had never told his cousin about his daughter. The image of his dream came to mind, Guillume with sharp teeth and red eyes. He was suddenly grateful Guillume did not know about Rose.

There had been a time growing up when he and Guillume were close. Very close. They told each other their most treasured secrets and desires. Marcus couldn't recall what his aspiration had been, but he remembered Guillume's. It had startled him. Marcus had expected wealth or strength. But Guillume had proclaimed his most treasured desire was power.

Was that what the book contained? Power? Prickles raced along his shoulders, and he rolled them to rid himself of the anxious feeling. This trepidation must be because of the dreams he'd been having.

He opened his eyes. Sage had lowered one of her legs, resting the book on the other one. Her sword lay in the scabbard beside her on the ground. But her eyes were locked on his. When she saw he was staring, she grinned and then lowered her gaze to the book.



Marcus's mind began to wander over her body again.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

At first, Marcus wasn't certain he had heard her. "Sorry?" he asked in confusion.

"For what I said. About your daughter being better off with someone else. Someone who doesn't lie. Everyone lies."

"You were angry," he justified.

"Don't do that. Don't make excuses for the bad things I do."

Marcus nodded.

"But you're right. I was angry. That doesn't excuse it. I shouldn't have said it."

She had admitted her fault and apologized. It was more than many others would do. Marcus admired that. Silence spread around them. Crickets chirped in the distance. The leaves of the trees above their head rustled in a gentle breeze.

"You must miss her," Sage stated.

Marcus bobbed his head. "When I am not being attacked."

Sage grinned. Her smile slowly faded, and she wondered, "Do you visit her?"

"No. It's best if Rose believes that Emma and her husband are her parents."

"Are you certain?"

"She's three. I don't imagine it matters now," Marcus said.

"It will. What happened to her mother? Why didn't she want her?"

Marcus clenched his teeth. Cassandra. "She was spoiled, wealthy, and entitled. She said a child would ruin her chances at a better life. She kept the pregnancy a secret."

"Did you love her?"

Marcus stared at Sage sitting across from him near the base of a tree. There was something in the tone of her voice, something in the glint of her eyes. He couldn't place it.

"I don't think I ever loved her. I loved being envied by other men. I loved being the sole recipient of her attention. Her newest bauble." He chuckled self-loathingly and shifted his stare to the dark, cold ground. "I should have known. She grew tired of me and moved on. Then she discovered she was with child."

He remembered when she had accused him of impregnating her on purpose, of spilling his seed inside of her to keep her, to bind her to him. "She threatened to get rid of the child. To drink some concoction and flush it out."

His lips thinned in disgust. "I think in the end, she was too afraid of Hell to kill the babe. Either way, she was disgusted with me, and I didn't see her for the entire pregnancy. I didn't know whether she kept the babe or got rid of it. She wouldn't see me. Then, one night, she

sent a messenger for me. She was lying in this big bed, the poor little baby on the chilly stone floor, not even wrapped in a blanket. Cast aside like refuge.”

Sage was leaning forward, a concerned look on her face. The book was forgotten beside her.

“At first, I didn’t know what to do. The baby was so small. I was afraid to pick her up. I was afraid I would hurt her.” He recalled the dark room, lit only by one candle very far from the baby. A midwife stood in the corner, pacing from Cassandra to the edge of the bed and back as if she wanted to tend to the child. “Her voice was callous and strained with hatred. She told me to take it and get out. And never, ever come back.”

“Marcus,” Sage gasped with sympathy.

Marcus waved her statement away. “It was a long time ago.” But he would never forget the Cassandra’s curled, venomous lips. “I never went back, and I never saw her again. I didn’t want to.” He looked at Sage. He had never told that to anyone. No one had asked. “What she did to Rose, her own flesh and blood, an innocent baby, was...unforgivable.”

Sage’s brow creased as she thought, and she sucked on her lower lip. “What a horrible person. How were you attracted to her in the first place?”

Marcus grinned. “I was young, inexperienced, and naïve. I just knew she was beautiful.”

Sage lifted her eyebrows. “Well, Rose is much better off without her.”

Marcus nodded. He would make sure that his daughter was loved and would never be hungry. He would make sure that she had a good life. “Do you have any children?”

Sage scoffed. “Me?” She shook her head. “No.”

“Ever been in love?” he asked.

She glanced down at the book and picked it up, placing it inside her armor. “No.”

Lord, Marcus wished he were that book. To be so treasured and hidden against her warm flesh. He mentally shook himself and thought of a question to distract himself. “Tell me of your family.”

Her brows rose. “What do you know about them?” she asked.

“Not much. I’ve heard talk.”

“You know they will not rest until I am safe.”

“You *are* safe.”

“I think they would see it differently. You kidnapped me, stabbed Brother Nicolas.” She held up one of her hands in supplication. “Even if it wasn’t your intention to do so. It doesn’t look good for you.”

Marcus shrugged. “It never does.”

Sage touched her stomach where the book rested. "How did you know Christian had the book?"

"I followed him from Paris. He received the book from Jacques de Molay."

Sage's mouth dropped in surprise. "The Grand Master of the Knights Templar? Christian doesn't know him!"

Marcus narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "You don't know him well, do you?"

"Christian? He is an old family friend."

Marcus nodded. "And loyal to the Knights Templar. Molay is a good friend of his."

"Christian?" Sage echoed in doubt. She glanced at the ground, her eyes moving as if she were searching for the answer. "Why would the Grand Master give Christian, a trusted friend, this book?"

"For safekeeping?" Marcus mused. He shrugged. "I'm not certain. You might as well ask why my cousin wants the book."

"The only way we'll know is by deciphering it." Sage leaned back against the tree, gazing up at the starry night sky. She absently twirled a strand of her shortened brown hair in her finger thoughtfully. "Your cousin is close to the king, isn't he?"

Marcus didn't know Guillaume's relationship with the king. "He works for him. That's all I know."

"From what I've heard, he is the king's lackey. He would do anything for him."

Tension raced along Marcus's shoulders. "What are you getting at?"

Sage licked her lips, drawing his attention to their wetness. "How well do you know your cousin?" she asked.

"We are family," Marcus answered. She should understand that.

"Are you close?"

"We were at one point. When we were growing up. We went our separate ways after our training."

"And after all this time, he summoned you to get the book? It seems suspicious, doesn't it?"

Marcus didn't like what Sage was inferring. "He wouldn't try to kill me. I am going to give him the book. It doesn't make sense."

"Who else could it have been?"

# Chapter 15

**M**arcus's lips tightened in irritation. "It could have been anyone. Robbers, Templars?" "Robbers wouldn't dress as Templar knights to attack us," Sage responded.

"And that's another thing," Marcus protested, disliking her reasoning. "If Guillume was going to try to kill me, why would he have his men dress as Templar knights? It doesn't make any sense."

Sage nodded. "Unless he didn't want to be connected to the attempt. He would have his enemies to blame for his cousin's death."

It was sound reasoning. Lord, he hated her analytical mind sometimes. "He is my cousin," Marcus insisted, angered at the idea. "We are family."

Sage looked away from him, pursing her lips in an attempt to keep silent.

Marcus inhaled to calm himself. "Guillume would never do that." And yet, even as he proclaimed his cousin's innocence, doubt festered at the corners of his mind. Guillume had become the king's pawn. He was ruthless. But surely, not against his cousin. Marcus had gone after the book without question. He had defended Guillume's innocence in killing the pope to many people, including Sage. And for her to insinuate that his cousin was responsible for the attack on his life was repulsive. He shook his head. "Maybe they weren't after me. Maybe they were after you."

Sage shrugged, a grin curving her lips. "Maybe."

"Maybe they weren't after the book. I mean, they never asked about it."

Sage bobbed her head patiently.

Marcus's eyes narrowed. She was placating him.

"If they knew we had the book, they wouldn't need to ask," Sage stated.

He clenched his teeth. Everything she said made sense. Still, he refused to believe his cousin would try to have him killed. Guillume was family, the closest thing to a brother he had. He ground his teeth, incensed at the thought, infuriated that she had put the idea in his head.

She sighed. "Marcus, I didn't mean to hurt you. I just want you to be aware of all the possibilities."

“What would you do if I suggested one of your family wanted to kill you?” he demanded.

She considered his words silently for a moment, her finger pausing in the lone lock of long hair at the side of her face. Then, a smile bubbled on her lips, and she fought to keep a straight face. “Laugh.”

Marcus sighed. Her grin was contagious, and he couldn’t help but answer her amusement with his own grin. “Granted. It wouldn’t happen for you. I am envious.”

“Envious?” she echoed in surprise.

“To have a family that you could depend on like that.” Marcus paused, glancing at his horse near a tree. His horse was the only constant family he had interacted with in years. And he hadn’t even named him. “It must be nice.”

“Nice?” she scoffed. “You don’t know what it is like to have so much pressure on you. You have to learn to fight. And you have to be good. Father’s skill was the level we endeavored to attain.” She shook her head. “I just couldn’t live up to it.”

Marcus scowled. “I heard he is an admirable fighter.”

“Admirable? He is the *best*. Raven and Willow idolized him. But not me.” Sage leaned back against the tree. “I was different. I wanted to learn. I wanted always to know why. And they looked at me...” She turned to him, and anguish shone on her face in the light of the moon. “As though they couldn’t understand me.”

Marcus’s gaze swept her. A thin girl. Looking at her, one would think she needed protection. But they would be wrong. Still, her admission of feeling as an outsider in her own family made him want to put his arms around her and console her.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love them. I do. I would do anything for them. They’re my family,” she clarified.

He stood and moved to her side to sit. He rested his shoulder against hers and bent his head to whisper, “But they’re not like you.”

“No,” she admitted with gratitude. She swiveled her head, and her breath washed over his face.

His gaze skimmed from her eyes to rest on her lips. Such full, kissable lips. It was a mistake. He had no place with her. She would return to her family, and he would continue working as a mercenary. He knew he should stay far away.

But he couldn’t.

She leaned forward and wrapped her fingers in the hair at his nape. She tilted her lips toward his.

Instinctively, Marcus bent to her, meeting her halfway. So dangerous. But at that moment, he didn’t care. He wanted to comfort her as much as he needed to be comforted.

Her lips slid over his, igniting a burning inside him. A burning for

her. She ran her tongue along his lips, and hunger surged through him as though he had been starving his entire life and finally found the food that would satisfy him. He tugged her closer until their bodies came together.

When she parted her lips, their tongues met and warred.

Desire flooded through him. He wanted her. All of her. He felt a bond with her that transcended physical need. She matched his strength, and he admired her. They were both outsiders in their families, and they needed to be a part of something special.

He peppered kisses across her jaw and down her neck.

She gasped slightly.

Her soft pant was an enticing drug that he longed to have more of. His hand trailed down her back and over her rounded bottom.

Oh, Lord. He wanted her so badly. More than he had ever wanted any woman. But she was a Hawke. He would have to let her go. He paused and pulled back to look down at her. Beneath the pale moonlight bathing her face, passion filled her lidded eyes. Her fully kissed lips were succulent, and she leaned up for more.

A Hawke, he thought again and hesitated. Her family would kill him. Her father would destroy him. He had to think of Rose. Of caring for her and supporting her.

Staring down at Sage, he realized she wanted this as much as he. It had nothing to do with her family. Still, he knew she was innocent. He didn't want to hurt her. With a low groan, he separated from her. Every instinct in him wanted to return and sweep her up in his arms. And never let go.

He quickly stood and took a step back, his mind screaming she was dangerous.

The passion disappeared from her eyes, and she looked at him in confusion. She rose, looking to him for answers.

He was no monk, that was certain. He wanted to make love to her beneath the stars right now. And why shouldn't he? He wasn't pure. He wasn't a saint. But he knew he had nothing to offer her. He already had one person to care for, and it was all he could do to keep enough jobs to give coin to Rose. What if Sage got pregnant? What if she turned him away as Cassandra had?

He had no one in his life. No one to trust. And he didn't want to depend on her, only to have her abandon him. "We shouldn't..."

She immediately shook her head. "No," she agreed but quickly turned away.

He wanted to explain; he didn't want her to leave, and he reached out to seize her arm. She yanked her arm free.

A beige, small item floated from her pocket to land on the dark ground. It gleamed in the moonlight.

Perplexed, Marcus reached for it.

Sage snatched it up and closed her fingers around it, preventing him from seeing the item.

He gazed at her. Her eyes were wide and round as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't. "What is that?"

"Um..." She shook her head. "Nothing." She pocketed the item.

Marcus followed her. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him.

Startled, her hands balanced on his chest.

His gaze moved over her face, searching for answers.

She licked her lips.

His hand dove into the pocket in her breeches before she could protest or move away. His fingers closed over some thick, small contents, and he pulled them out, releasing her.

She stumbled back and reached for his hand.

He pulled it away from her grasp and opened his fingers to glance down at the contents. Many small pieces of beige parchment glowed in the moonlight in his palm, very bright beneath the rays of the moon. Bewilderment washed over him amid tingles of familiarity. He had seen one of these before. At Gareth's smithy. In the doorway. In the mud. His gaze snapped up to Sage, pinning her with fury.

She straightened. "I, um...I use those for ideas."

His stare hardened. "You were leaving a trail."

## Chapter 16

**“You wanted your family to find us,”** Marcus Sage opened her mouth to put forth an excuse and then closed it, swallowing heavily. Caught. “That was before we decided we were working together.”

He clenched his fist around the pieces of parchment and whirled, storming toward the horse.

“Where are you going?” Sage asked as panic brewed inside of her.

“I’m leaving.”

“Leaving?” she echoed, trailing him. “Leaving where?”

He spun on her, his form as imposing as a dark cloud. “Leaving *you*.”

Her stomach fell. “But we’re working together,” she said weakly. “You said you would teach me to read.”

He held up his clenched fist with the parchment in it. “Not only did you leave a trail for your family, but for those men who attacked us. They followed your trail. That’s how they found us.”

Surprise washed over Sage. He was right. She had led those assassins right to them. She had almost gotten them killed.

He tossed the parchment aside in disgust and held his hand out. “Give me the book.”

“Marcus,” she said softly, pleadingly.

“Give it to me,” he commanded.

She jumped at the anger in his voice. She had never seen him so furious. She reached into her armor and pulled the book out, handing it to him.

He snatched it from her and continued to the horse.

Sage stood despondently. It was her fault they had been attacked; she didn’t blame him for wanting nothing further to do with her. Stupid, she berated herself. She should have known better. She should have known others would be looking for the book. She watched him walk away, his back stiff with anger, his fists clenched. He could have been killed.

She inhaled a shaky breath. He *should* leave her. She had endangered his life with a foolish decision. And yet, she didn’t want him to. She walked up to him as he saddled the horse.

She watched his quick, angry movements for a moment, knowing



this was the last time she would see him. "I'm sorry." She bent and picked up one of the saddlebags, handing it to him.

"I don't want your apology," he snapped, ripping the bag from her hand to attach it to the saddle.

She bowed her head, allowing his fury to wash over her.

He growled quietly and whirled, tying the saddlebag to the saddle.

She truly didn't blame him for being so angry. She should have known others could follow her trail. But the thought had not crossed her mind. She was leaving the trail for her sisters. She should have thought of the danger she was putting them both in. Now, it was too late. She stepped back, giving him room to prepare to leave.

He finished attaching the saddlebags and mounted the horse.

Sage took another step back, twisting her hands before her. He was the first man to kiss her. And she had betrayed his trust just as she was beginning to like him. The pain in her chest and the extreme disappointment in herself was worse than any physical wound she'd ever had—even when Willow had accidentally sliced her arm with a sword. She stared up at Marcus, trying to memorize his features. His short blond hair jerked with his harsh movements. His jaw was stiff with rage. His eyes snapped fire as he stared at her. There was nothing she could say to him. Because if it were her, she would feel the same way.

He reined in the horse and charged away from her.



Marcus was furious as he urged the horse toward the road. He couldn't believe *she* was the reason those attackers had found them! How was he supposed to depend on her? Depend on her? he scoffed. She was only supposed to decipher the book, and she couldn't even do that. He clenched his fists around the reins. She had endangered her own life as well as his. His jaw tightened so hard it hurt. How could she not have known others would track her trail? She was a rational, intelligent, clever woman. She should have known better.

And still, a nagging urge to return to her filled him. Why did he think he should not leave her alone in the middle of the forest? Why was he convinced he was doing the wrong thing?

She had stood, not arguing, not professing her innocence. Just standing in the moonlight with tall shadows that could hide assassins or rapists lingering all around her. Her hands had been nervously wringing, her uneven hair hanging around her face. She could have been killed as well as him.

God's blood! With numerous muttered oaths, he turned the horse around and rode back to her. She still stood there with her shoulders hunched, watching. So small, so...damned alone. His heart twisted despite every effort to stop it, despite every effort to tell himself he was right. He reined the horse in before her, glaring down at her.

She was so tiny in this big forest, so...

Untrustworthy. And still, he couldn't leave her. He uttered another curse and dismounted. He knew she was more than capable of taking care of herself. Yet, that thought didn't stop the silly, honorable notion that whirled inside of him. He needed to protect her. Four men had attacked them. Even she could not fight off four men. Besides, who knew what else lurked in these woods?

He could not leave her alone.

She said nothing as he paused before her. And that was a good thing. She watched as he took the saddlebags from the horse and removed the saddle. She followed as he stalked across the clearing and sat heavily beneath the tree where they had just kissed.

He closed his eyes.

"Marcus..." she said softly.

"No," he said, holding up a finger to stop her. "No. Not another word."

She nodded and retreated, almost folding in on herself.

Guilt slammed down on him. Damn! Why did he feel guilty? What did he have to feel guilty about? She was the one who left the trail for those men who meant to kill them. No. No, he refused to feel an ounce of remorse. He crossed his arms. Not one ounce.

He opened an eye slightly and stared as she settled beneath the trunk of a tree across from him.

Not one ounce, he repeated, ignoring the heaviness on his shoulders.



The next morning, they rode to the road. Sage knew Marcus was watching for anyone following them, as he should be.

She had barely slept the entire night. She had been certain she would wake to find him gone. But he had not left her.

He hadn't said a word to her all morning. He had handed her half a loaf of bread and indicated the horse without looking at her.

It made her sad that she had betrayed his confidence. Now, they travelled together, and it was torture. She could feel his arms around her as they gripped the reins. She could feel his strong thighs along

hers.

### *Torture.*

She didn't know how to make it up to him. She didn't know what to do to make it right, what to say.

It wasn't long after they set out that the horse started to limp on its front right hoof. Sage noticed the change in gate immediately. Marcus pulled the horse to a stop and dismounted. Sage slid from the horse as well.

He walked to the front of the horse, running his hands down it and over the knee before lifting the leg to inspect his hoof. "Damn it," he muttered.

"What is it?" Sage asked, worried but hoping she could somehow help. These were the first words they had spoken all morning.

"The shoe has come off." He stood up and looked first one way and then the other. "We'll have to walk to le Carla and have the blacksmith reshoe him."

*Le Carla.* Tingles raced up her spine. She and her family had been to the town many times. She knew people there. "Marcus," she started to admit the fact.

Marcus shook his head and held up his hand. "No more lies," he said.

"But..."

"No," he commanded and stared at her for a long moment. "We will go our separate ways in le Carla."

Sadness swept over her. "I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

"You should have," he sternly said as he took the reins and began walking down the dirt road.

Misery swept through her like a gust of wind. He no longer wanted her with him. She forced her mind from the thought and searched for something else to dwell on. The book. It was easier, safer to concentrate on that than her wretched feelings. She only wished she could decode it before Marcus left. She wished she could prove herself to him.

She watched the road beneath her feet as they walked, thinking of their progress in decoding it. Marcus's first suggestion of "last to first" was good, but she didn't believe it fit. When she had substituted the letters, none of the new words made sense. They weren't words. Just a jumble of letters. Besides, what did "last to first" have to do with treasure?

They came to a crossroad, and Marcus walked to the north.

Sage glanced up at the sign. Le Carla with an arrow pointing north. Another arrow pointed down the perpendicular road with a word beneath it. She tried to sound it out quietly, but the first two letters together were throwing her off. *E-A*. "What is this word?" she asked

Marcus, staring at the sign.

Marcus paused and looked back at her, following her gaze to the sign. "East."

"East," she repeated. *Last to first*. The final two letters in last, first, and east were *S-T*. What if they were wrong? What if the word wasn't last? What if it was east?

Excitement left her breathless. "Marcus," she called.

He stopped and turned to her.

"What if this book is not about treasure? What if it's directions?"

Marcus glanced at the sign and then at Sage. His face was resolute and stoic. "It doesn't matter. It will have to be good enough that I retrieved the book for Guillume. I am not going to decode it."

## Chapter 17

**M**arcus shook his head at the tall, lanky but muscular blacksmith. “My word is my bond,” he promised. The air in the smithy in le Carla was thick and smelled of sulfur.

“Ha,” the blacksmith answered, brushing his shaggy black hair from his eyes. “I’ve heard that before.”

Frustrated, Marcus glanced at Sage. She leaned against the wooden wall of the blacksmith’s shop, watching him with crossed arms. She clearly disproved of his admission that he was not going to decode the book. But it didn’t matter. They would go their separate ways now. He was still angry with her for endangering their lives by carelessly and recklessly leaving that trail. He had hoped that telling her he wasn’t going to decode the book would make her leave.

The blacksmith was not helping to ease his anger. Marcus was anxious to be out of le Carla before he was recognized. Yet, there was a problem. He didn’t have enough coin to pay the blacksmith to reshoe his horse.

“No work without pay,” the blacksmith said and turned away, walking back to his anvil. He sat behind it and picked up a hammer to continue pounding out a piece of steel.

The banging was in time to the throbbing in Marcus’s head. He shook his head in frustration before strolling to Sage. “You don’t have to stay.”

She stared at him for a quiet moment, her brown eyes sad yet defiant. “Where am I to go?”

There it was. That twisting of his heart. At least some of the fire had come back to her tone. “Fine. But you are not leaving this village with me.”

She looked over his shoulder at the blacksmith. “Is he going to shoe the horse?”

Marcus shook his head. “No. I’ll find someone else.”

“Why?” she asked. “What’s wrong? It will take over a day to walk to another village. Why can’t he do it?”

It wasn’t that he couldn’t do it. Marcus knew he would have the same problem anywhere he went. He had no coin. No blacksmith would shoe a horse for free. He didn’t have any items to barter with and no time to offer his services. He was hesitant to tell Sage that. She didn’t need to know he was out of coin. She might think he was

unprepared for this mission. He grimaced. What did he care what she thought?

"He doesn't have time," Marcus lied quickly. "I'll leave the horse and—"

"Doesn't have time?" Sage mumbled in disbelief and stepped past Marcus to the blacksmith before he could stop her. "I know you are busy, but certainly shoeing one horse won't take much time."

"Sage," Marcus called.

But it was too late. The blacksmith looked up in irritation, running a hand across his sweaty forehead. When he saw her, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Sage?" he asked.

She put a hand on her hip, nodding.

Marcus groaned inwardly. He had been concerned someone would recognize *him*. He had not even considered Sage. He stepped up behind her, murmuring, "We should go."

The blacksmith stood. "Sage Hawke?"

Dread filled Marcus, and his hand dropped to the pommel of his sword, ready for a battle.

Sage raised her eyebrows. "I should be insulted you didn't recognize me."

The blacksmith put his hammer down and came out from behind his anvil. "If you were with two other beautiful girls and a hulking man, I would have recognized you instantly." He grabbed Sage in a huge bear hug, lifting her feet from the floor.

Stunned, Marcus watched and slowly removed his hand from the handle of his sword.

When the blacksmith set her down, she took a step back.

A grin lit his soot-stained face. "Heavens, girl!" His gaze skimmed over her. "I haven't seen you in two harvests."

Sage grinned. "Good to see you, Peter."

They were acquaintances. Maybe even friends. Marcus clenched his jaw in anger. She had lied to him. She had somewhere to go. She could stay with this man.

"Where is your family?" Peter, the blacksmith, asked, looking toward the door and then at Marcus.

Marcus stiffened, awaiting her answer. Would she tell this Peter the truth and have him thrown in the stocks? He tensed, preparing to run.

"We're traveling separately right now. They are working different jobs," Sage lied.

A confused scowl crossed Marcus's brow before he relaxed it. She hadn't given him away. Why wouldn't she tell Peter the truth?

"Tell them to stop and say hello when they have time," Peter muttered. He scratched his head. "It's been so long."

"I will," Sage responded.

Peter jerked a finger toward Marcus. "Are you traveling with this man?"

Sage nodded. "I am."

"You should tell him to get some coin before he asks a man to do labor. But for you, I will gladly shoe the horse."

Sage grinned slyly, glancing at Marcus in understanding. "We're working on a job now. I'll come back and pay you when we are finished."

Humiliation burned through Marcus. Yes. He had no coin to fend for himself. He clenched his jaw. Now, she knew. It didn't matter that she knew. Still, he looked away in embarrassment.

"Nah," Peter said, waving a hand. "It's on the house." He swept his hand out across the horseshoes nailed to the wall around the room. "I have plenty. A good blacksmith always does."

Sage smiled. "And Father always said you were the best."

Peter beamed with pride. "He should say that if he knows what's good for him."

Marcus had not been wise to forget Sage and her family were well known. He should have realized she would know people in the towns they visited. At least he would have no qualms leaving her here. She would be well taken care of. She would be safe. "How long will it take?"

Peter glared at him with a cold stare.

"We are grateful," Marcus explained quickly. He got the impression that Peter didn't like him.

"We're in a hurry," Sage added.

The man seemed to be fond of her, which bothered Marcus more than he was willing to admit.

"Perhaps an hour," Peter replied. "It shouldn't take long."

Sage nodded. "We'll be back. Thank you." She moved to Marcus's side, an amused grin on her lips.

Marcus looked away. He bent to pick up the saddlebags near the doorway and led the way out of the smithy. He perused the dirt road. Houses made of wattle and daub lined the street. A farmer led a horse pulling a wagon two houses down from them.

"Are you going to leave me now?" Sage asked.

Marcus glanced at her. "Yes."

"You should at least thank me for getting Peter to shoe your horse," Sage grumbled.

Yes. For that, Marcus was grateful. "Thank you."

Sage grunted in disbelief. "At least you have manners."

"What does that mean?"

"You're lucky I didn't turn you in," Sage said. "I could have told

him the truth. How you kidnapped me. How you killed Brother Nicolas.”

Marcus gritted his teeth. “I said thank you.”

“And while we’re at it...”

Marcus glared at her. He was ready for a fight. “What?”

She sighed softly. “I am truly sorry for leading those men to us.”

Marcus’s gaze swept her face. He had been unprepared for that. Her brown hair was longer on one side of her face than the other, a constant reminder of how close she had come to dying. He fought the urge to tuck the lengthier strand behind her ear. He scanned the street. Trees swayed in the gentle breeze, and branches rustled. A few leaves rolled across the road. “How many people do you know in this town?”

“Many,” she admitted.

He nodded, shifting the saddlebags on his shoulder. It was time to separate. “Look...”

“I tried to tell you I knew people in le Carla, but you wouldn’t listen. You wouldn’t let me talk.”

He had been angry. He hadn’t wanted to hear her excuses. And now was the perfect time to depart. She knew people here. They would take care of her. She would be in no danger. “I think it’s time —”

“Are you hungry?” she interrupted.

There was desperation in her tone. She knew what he was doing. He glanced at her in resignation.

“We can get food,” Sage hurried on as if knowing what he was going to say.

She was only postponing the inevitable. Marcus began to shake his head.

“You have an hour,” she protested. “You might as well get something to eat.”

“I have no coin, remember?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I have friends, remember?”

Reluctantly, Marcus followed her down the dirt road. Separating was going to be much more difficult than he anticipated. He had to remember that he was angry with her. But with her kindness and loyalty, his anger was fading.



Sage led the way into the inn at the edge of the village. It was a small cottage with harvested fields behind it. Farmer William and his



wife, Agnes, lived there, along with their son Jacob and their two girls, Amy and Emily. They were good friends of the Hawke family, and Sage was certain they would give them some bread and ale. She knew Marcus was out of coin and most likely hungry.

The main room, which consisted of two wooden tables and a hearth, was empty as they entered. "Good day!" Sage called.

Marcus glanced around uneasily. "We should go."

"They're friends," she promised him. Plus, she wanted to see how Amy and Emily were getting along. She hadn't seen them for years. They must be...

A slim girl with dishwater blonde hair emerged from a room in the back. She wore a brown dress that came to her ankles and black boots. She brushed her hair from her shoulder, grabbed a cloth, and met them in the middle of the room. "Good day. Sorry. We're rounding up the ducks. Can I get you something?"

Was she really twelve summers? Sage could only stare. She had blossomed into a beautiful young girl. Sage was so happy. It didn't seem that long ago that she and her sisters had saved Amy and Emily from the horrible life they had been leading. "Amy?" she asked with bated breath.

The girl scowled, and her gaze at her in confusion. "No," she replied hesitantly.

"Emily!"

The girl's scowl deepened.

"Sage!" A male voice boomed with excitement from the doorway. A tall man with dark hair stood in the doorway. His face lit up with happiness.

Sage gaped in disbelief. "Jacob?" He had been a lanky boy when she had last seen him. "What happened?" she demanded as he came out of the room to stand beside Emily. "You were a scrawny little boy the last time I saw you."

He shucked his head.

"Told you that you were scrawny," Emily whispered.

Jacob gently shoved her. "What are you doing here?"

Sage's eyebrows rose. "Not exactly the greeting I was hoping for, but..." She smiled. "Peter is shoeing our horse." She indicated Marcus. "This is Marcus."

Jacob nodded to Marcus.

"I'll go get Ma and Pa," Emily said and raced out the doorway, calling for them.

"Where are your sisters?" Jacob asked.

"We're working separate jobs," Sage explained. "How are things going here?"

Jacob grinned. "Good. The farm is doing well. We're far enough

from everything that we hear things but are left alone. No one bothers us.”

“That’s why we like it here,” Sage said.

Jacob’s lips twisted in disbelief. “Says you, who hasn’t been by for years.”

Sage scratched her strangely bare neck and shrugged playfully. “Peter said the same thing.”

“Sage!” William hurried through the doorway, his age limiting him to a slower pace. He was an older man with graying hair.

Sage met him at the entrance, and he wrapped her in a warm embrace. She was glad he had Jacob and the girls to help him.

William was followed by his wife, Agnes, and his other daughter, Amy. Agnes was a kindly woman with gentle brown eyes. Her hair was peppered with silver and pulled back in a bun. Amy was a younger version of her sister.

Affection heated Sage at being surrounded by people she trusted and loved, and she realized how much she missed her family. Then she glanced at Marcus, standing outside the group. He stood awkwardly, his gaze shifting from person to person uneasily. It was apparent he had never known this kind of kinship. Sage took his hand and pulled him into the family. “Marcus and I are working together.”

Judging eyes turned to him, sweeping over him.

Marcus straightened under their perusal.

Then, William slapped him on the shoulder. “Be good to her, son.”

Marcus looked at Sage.

She grinned at him, hoping he felt the kindness of friends.

“Jacob! Go and get them some porridge. Amy, ale. Emily, help Jacob,” Agnes commanded, leading the way to one of the tables.

Sage sat in one of the wooden chairs.

“This isn’t necessary,” Marcus protested, taking a seat beside Sage. “I’ll be leaving soon.”

Sage looked at Agnes, ignoring him. “I see the girls are working out well.”

Agnes grinned, glancing back at the door with a loving expression. “They are family. We all love them so much. Thank you, Sage. It was a wise decision.”

Sage shrugged. “It was Willow’s idea. They look healthy. You all do.”

“The crops have been good,” William admitted, scrutinizing Marcus with a narrowed gaze. “You wouldn’t, by any chance, be Nogaret?”

Marcus pulled his shoulders back and exchanged a glance with Sage before nodding. “I am.”

William turned to Agnes. “Go and tell the children to hurry.”

Agnes obeyed with a quick nod.

Apprehension filled Sage. William was dismissing his wife. There was something he wanted to tell them in private.

When Agnes had exited the room, William sat at the table and leaned forward secretively. "Not a day ago, some men were asking after a Marcus de Nogaret."

Marcus stiffened.

Sage propped her foot on the chair, bent her leg, and wrapped her arm around her knee. "We were attacked by some men in the woods."

"Did they tell you what they wanted?" Marcus asked.

William shook his head. "They never mentioned Sage, either."

"They didn't know we were working together," Sage clarified.

"At least you defeated them unscathed. I'm sure if they had known Sage was with you, they would have rethought their plans."

Sage grinned. "That's the last mistake those four will ever make."

"Four?" William asked, confused. "Four men attacked you?"

Sage and Marcus nodded.

"*Five* men were asking after you."

# Chapter 18

**T**he room stilled with tension and dread. Marcus looked at Sage, and they simultaneously realized there was another assassin still out there.

She stood.

“You can’t remain here,” Marcus said, staring at her as he rose. He couldn’t let her stay. Not with another assassin after them. The assassin had no doubt seen the fight in the woods and knew Sage was involved. She was now in this as deep as he was. “We have to leave.”

She stepped to his side. “We can’t leave until your horse is shod.”

Marcus glanced at the farmer and then back at Sage. “We can’t stay here. We don’t want to endanger their lives.”

Realization followed by concern dawned in her large eyes. “You don’t think he’d come here?”

“I’m not willing to risk it.”

Sage nodded and turned to the farmer, who had risen.

“We have horses you can use,” William suggested. “We’ll get food together for you. Whatever you need.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Marcus insisted. Taking their kindness and involving them only endangered them further.

“You didn’t. I offered,” William said.

“It could put your lives in danger. I can’t ask you to help us,” Marcus asserted.

William grinned, glancing at Sage. “I’ve known the Hawkes for a long time. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Sage’s face twisted with gratitude. She embraced William. “Thank you.”

Marcus envied the connection they had, the friendship. He had friends, but none that would help him as William was doing.

Jacob, Agnes, Amy, and Emily returned carrying trenchers and mugs of ale.

William waved his hand. “Wrap it in cloth, Agnes. They are leaving. Jacob, saddle two of our best horses. Amy, Emily, help your ma get the food and ale ready for them.”

The younger farmers immediately moved to do William’s bidding. Agnes stood for a moment, staring at Sage with a crease of worry on her brow before she bowed her head and returned to the back room.

“Please be careful, William,” Sage pleaded.

William smiled. "We've done this before for your father."

Marcus held out a hand. "Thank you."

William clasped it just below the elbow. "You take care of her."

Marcus nodded. "I will. You must take my horse when the blacksmith is done shoeing him."

"When it is safe, I will be certain to do exactly that," William agreed.

"When this is over, I'll be back to pay you," Sage promised.

William dismissed her statement with a wave. "You girls gave us our daughters. You owe us nothing. We owe you the world."

Marcus led them to the door.

"Go out the back," William called. "There is direct access to the forest."

Marcus nodded and followed Sage to the back room door. "Thank you again for your help."

William's gaze shifted between Marcus and Sage, echoing Sage's earlier sentiment. "Be careful."



Marcus vigilantly navigated the horse through the forest. Every instinct he had was heightened. He listened to the sounds of the forest. He watched for any sudden movements. One assassin left. Trailing them, most likely. Marcus kept to the cover of the trees and brush, moving slowly and then changing pace to a canter as they hurried toward the road. They rode down the road for a while, and then he turned into the forest again for cover. He glanced back at Sage. She was watching, too, scanning the surrounding area. They both knew how dangerous this was.

Marcus hoped they had lost the last assassin. He hoped that having two horses instead of one would throw him off their path. At the very least, he hoped that the assassin had followed them to the blacksmith's shop in le Carla and was waiting for them there. Or that the assassin had gone back to report to whomever had hired him. But Marcus knew he couldn't count on that. He had to assume the man was still tracking them, waiting for the right time to attack.

He backtracked, steering the horse the way they had come, hoping to evade the assassin if he was still pursuing them. He steered his horse through the forest, around to the stream he knew from his days as a boy. He would find the cave, which was situated near a pond by the stream. He wanted to rest for the remainder of the day and make certain no one was following them.

Because of the stop in le Carla, he had lost valuable time. Now, instead of an entire day, he only had half of a day before he had to meet his cousin. Guillume would be waiting for him in Les Labadous at noon on the morrow.

They rode until the sun was high in the sky. Marcus knew the cave was close. He concentrated on the surroundings, the rustling of the leaves, the chirping of the birds. Although everything seemed normal, he did not let his guard down.

He rounded a bend and pulled the horse to a stop, signaling Sage to do the same with a lift of his hand. His gaze skimmed the secluded area.

A small pond glistened in the dappled sunlight. Two large, angled rocks formed a shelter. But Marcus was not looking at the relaxing landscape. He was searching the woods for movement, for the assassin.

When he saw no sign of anything out of the ordinary, he dismounted. Sage followed his lead. They walked the horses along the shoreline to the cave.

“What are we doing here?” Sage asked.

“Resting. Making certain we’ve lost the assassin.”

“You want to set a trap for him?” Sage asked.

Marcus turned to her. “No. I want to make sure we are safe before I have to turn over the book.”

Sage nodded and angled her jaw as if in thought. “What would happen if you didn’t give the book to your cousin?”

Truthfully, the thought had never occurred to him. Guillume had asked him to get the book, and he had. “I wouldn’t get my coin.”

Sage hummed and looked around at the forest and pond. “Is this place safe?”

Marcus shrugged. “I hope so. We’ll still have to keep an eye out.” He led his horse to a tree. “I’ll look around the area. You stay here.”

Sage wrapped the reins of her horse around a tree limb. He was about to depart when she asked him, “Why didn’t you leave me in le Carla?”

Marcus pulled himself up onto his horse. “It wasn’t safe.”

She stared at him with her hand on her hip as if she didn’t believe that was the answer.

“I couldn’t leave you there,” Marcus admitted, hoping he didn’t sound too concerned for her. He didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. The true reason he couldn’t leave her was that she was involved in this as deep as him, now that the last assassin knew about her.

“Is it because you still want to decipher that book?”

Marcus had to admit that Sage’s comment about directions had intrigued him. But even though he was curious about what was

hidden in the book, he would be glad to hand it over to Guillume and get his coin. He wanted to see Rose. And he wanted to be done with this assignment.

He shook his head, reached back, and opened the saddlebag to pull out the book. He stared down at it. It was nothing but a burden to him. He tossed it to her. "Yes," he lied. "That's exactly why."

She caught the book, but her gaze didn't waver from him. Her eyes narrowed slightly in disbelief. "You'd best be careful. You don't want me to think you care for me." Before he could reply, she turned away, opening the book.

Marcus stared at her. No, he didn't want that. And he certainly didn't care for her. And yet, as he watched her, a grin slid over his lips. He spurred his horse into the forest to scout for the assassin.



They had been working on the book for over two hours. They sat side by side, but not touching.

Marcus looked at Sage sideways. Her knee was lifted, and she was gazing down at the book, her arm resting on her raised knee. She flicked the feathered quill beneath her nose again and again. She was tenacious. He loved that about her. Loved? The word startled him, and he pushed the thought away, tearing his gaze from her. She was loved by others, but not by him. He admired her, yes. He was intrigued by her, yes. He enjoyed her company, yes. But he knew he would have to let her go. When she was safe. "Where will you go?"

Sage glanced up at him in confusion.

"After I give the book to Guillume," Marcus clarified. "What are your plans?"

Sage shrugged.

Marcus stretched his hand out to grab a bag. He searched through it. He was glad to see that it was well-stocked with food. He pulled out one of the cloth-wrapped packages that were still warm. "You can always stay with those farmers. What was his name? William?"

Sage didn't look up. "I'll find my sisters. Maybe I'll even convince them not to kill you."

Marcus grinned. "I would appreciate that. I already have one person who wants to kill me. I don't need more."

Sage shifted her gaze to him. "Will you go see Rose?"

"I'll leave coin for Rose, yes." He handed her the wrapped food.

"I think you should visit with her."

Marcus had already explained his reasoning for not interfering in

his daughter's life. "Those farmers...William. How do you know them?" He purposely changed the subject.

Sage unwrapped the food. "Family friends. My father knew them. My sisters and I saved the girls from..." She stopped, and even though she was looking down at the food, her eyes got a faraway, dark look to them, "A very bad life. Agnes and William took them in. Now they're family."

"It was kind of them to help you without question."

"That's what friends do. I would do the same for them."

Marcus pulled out another cloth-wrapped piece of food. He longed to have that kind of friendship. The only person he considered close to that kind of relationship was Guillaume. He parted the cloth and gazed at the meat. It must be chicken. Cooked, warm, and delicious. He couldn't remember when he last had meat. Eagerly, he took a bite. His mouth watered as the intense flavor exploded through his mouth. "Oh. This is delicious."

Sage smiled as she bit a piece of her chicken.

Marcus took two more bites and then removed the flask of ale from the bag. He drank deeply and handed it to Sage.

They ate in silence for a while, Marcus gazing at Sage. A longer lock of her hair hung loosely at the side of her face, swaying with her movements. Her angled jaw worked as she chewed her food. His gaze floated lower over her breasts and hips. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this."

Sage shrugged. "I had nothing better to do." She grinned at him, and her brown eyes sparkled. Then, she peered down at the book. "Besides, I wouldn't miss finding out what secrets this book holds for anything."

"For anything?" His gaze roamed over her face, lingering on her lips. He quickly looked away, feeling the stirrings of heat in the bottom of his stomach. He wanted to touch her again, and that was very dangerous.

That longer strand of hair fell forward. She growled in frustration, tossed aside the cloth the chicken meat had been wrapped in, and pulled her sword from its sheath. She tugged on the lock and swiped the sword through it, cutting it. She held it before her, snarling, "There," before flicking it aside.

Marcus finished the chicken and placed the cloth on the ground. Then, he removed his dagger from his belt. "Turn around."

She twisted to gaze up at him. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to even out your locks," Marcus stated.

"Oh," Sage said.

Marcus knelt behind her. "I've done this to my hair, but no one else's."



Sage shrugged. "It can't be worse than it is now." She sat straight with her hands folded in her lap.

Marcus gently drew the back of her hair straight. The strands of brown were soft, and for a moment, he stroked a strand between his thumb and forefinger. Then he snapped himself out of his reverie and ran the blade across it, evening out the hair at the nape of her neck, which was the shortest. It fell to just below her hairline. The ends curled against his fingers, wrapping around them. He swallowed in a suddenly dry throat. No woman had enticed him the way she did.

There was something about her that tempted every fiber in his body.

I'm only cutting her hair, he told himself and shifted to her side. His stomach bumped her shoulder and quivered in response. He reached for another strand of her hair and ran the blade through it, along her jaw. His gaze glided over her profile. She was beautiful. She had a strong jaw, a pert little nose, and high cheekbones. He paused for a moment to get his growing desire under control.

Quickly, he moved behind her, grateful she could not see him. He was afraid his desire would be easy to recognize. This was not the time or place. There was a man hunting them to kill them. And the book... They didn't have time. And yet...

He moved to her other side, cutting her hair until it was even. Then he returned to the spot behind her. He brushed a hand along her warm nape to sweep the hair from her neck. He felt her shiver, a delicious temptation.

Just cutting her hair, he reminded himself again. He placed the dagger on the ground and knelt before her. Taking a lock on each side of her face, he pulled it down to see if it was even. His gaze swung from one strand across her face to the other. And then his stare found her eyes. Large, bright, brown, and beautiful. Tempting.

He knew he was lost.

He couldn't protect her.

And he couldn't resist her.

# Chapter 19

She had never seen. There was a connection between Marcus and her that made her entire body come alive. His nearness was overwhelming, making her heart hammer in her chest. She wanted to kiss his lips again and again.

He brushed his fingers down her cheek to her jaw.

His skin grazing hers sent searing heat through her body. She wanted him to find her desirable. She wanted him to see her as beautiful as well as smart. She was trembling with want.

Yet, he didn't move. His gaze skimmed over her face and every spot it touched tingled until she could take no more. The need to touch him, the desire to kiss him, was so strong that she flung herself forward to kiss his lips.

He caught her, welcoming her kiss with open arms.

Desperate, they came together.

He took her mouth with a savage intensity that ignited flames of passion through her. Blood pounded through her mind in cadence to her beating heart.

She wanted to see him. She wanted to feel his power. She wanted to stroke his strong body. Eagerly, she grabbed the hem of his tunic and lifted it over his head, tossing it aside.

He was magnificent. She pulled back to look at his torso. She had seen men shirtless before. But not like this. Not like Marcus. She reached out and grazed his hot shoulder with her fingers, gasping softly. He was hard—all hard planes and ridges. She ran her hand over his shoulder and down his arms. He had muscles everywhere, muscles she had never seen in a man before. His arms were large and strong. When he lifted them to rest his hands at her waist, she felt his biceps flex. He was amazing.

Trembling, she touched his chest and let her fingers trail down his ribbed stomach. Firm planes lined his stomach and ribs. Her mouth dropped open in awe.

He claimed her lips again, pulling her close, wrapping her in a tight embrace.

Urgency built in her with every sweep of his tongue, with every touch of his hands. When she realized he was undoing the buckles on her armor, her breathing increased, and her breasts swelled.

Impatiently, she undid the buckles he had not reached yet and shrugged her armor off.

The half-chemise she wore beneath it was the only barrier between their skin. She wanted to have him against her. She lifted her chemise over her head and threw it to the ground.

Marcus's gaze moved slowly and hungrily over her.

If she weren't so ravenous for him, she might have been embarrassed at his stare. But she wanted to feel him. She raised her arms to embrace him, but he caught her wrists and slowly lowered them to her sides. His fingers brushed her lips, trailing a searing path over her jaw, down her throat, over her chest to the outside swell of her breast. She inhaled sharply as his thumb brushed her hardened nipple. His hand engulfed her small globe, his fingers moving around and under and over. The gentle message sent currents of desire sweeping through her. Her breasts surged at the tenderness of his touch.

He lowered his head to her, and his lips skimmed her taut nipple, sending waves of exhilaration through her. His hands dropped to her curved hips as she threw her head back, arching into his teasing touch. Spirals of desire and want crested over her until she believed her legs would no longer support her where she knelt before him.

He grasped a blanket from where he had planned to sleep and opened it, spreading it over the ground. Then he wrapped his arms around her, lowering her to the ground. As he lay over her, kissing her lips again, her breasts pressed against his bare skin. Their arms entwined, their torsos touching skin-to-skin. His hand glided over her rounded hip to her long legs.

She gasped lightly between parted lips. She had never known... Willow had not told her how... She gasped again as he kissed her neck, floating a trail of light caresses down her throat.

His hand moved across her flat stomach to the ties of her leggings. He tugged the string impatiently, and she reached down to pull the strings open. She was so wet. So very ready for him. He lay on top of her, and she opened her legs for him, instinctively nudging her hips to his. She could feel his excitement, his readiness, and she reached down between them to untie the strings of his leggings.

"Sage," he gasped.

She had never heard her name whispered with such want, such desire.

He leaned his head into her shoulder, dragging in breaths. Then he looked at her. "Are you certain?"

She stared at him in disbelief. She pressed kisses to his lips, whispering, "Yes. Oh, yes."

He touched her at her most intimate spot, sending swirling passion

pounding through her. It was as though his stroke soared her to the heavens. She couldn't help but cry out for release.

And then, he eased himself into her, slowly filling her. She gasped as the world shifted. When he began to move, she matched his rhythm, building and climbing higher until she shattered into a million floating stars. The world erupted around her, and she returned to Earth, cushioned in his arms.

He stared down at her, his gaze drifting over her face. He kissed her lips. He kissed her cheeks.

When he shifted his gaze to her again, she said, "Do it again."

A soul-wrenching smile came over his lips. He began to move his hips, leisurely at first, gliding in and out of her body. Filling her, then retreating. She drove up to meet him, their bodies moved together in harmony. He groaned softly, matching her thrusts. Then, he stiffened and pulled himself out of her. His seed splashed across her stomach.

Her mind analyzed what he had done. Saved her from becoming pregnant. It was a selfless act. And she should have considered it. What would her family say if she had come back to them fat with child? Still, she had not considered the possibility, and it annoyed her. She had been so...involved, so full of feeling, that her mind had not worked as it normally did.

He took a leaf from the ground and wiped her stomach clean, then discarded it. He stretched out beside her, pulling her into his warm, sated embrace.



Marcus held her for a moment, gently stroking her soft hair. "Are you well?"

"Yes," she said with perchance too much excitement.

He chuckled softly. The little minx. The beautiful, sultry, little minx. He sighed softly.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"Right now?" He shrugged. "Hold you for a while more." He propped himself up on his elbow to gaze tenderly down at her magnificent eyes. "Maybe kiss you again."

"You can kiss me anytime you want," she said with a grin.

He couldn't resist the invitation and bent his head to claim her lips in a long, lingering taste. A taste he would never grow tired of. When he pulled back, a satisfied sigh issued from her lips.

She was beautiful. There was no denying that. And her mind was amazing. Always considering, always analyzing.

She ran a hand down his sternum. "I meant with the book."

"We should decode it. We don't have much time left." He rolled over her, their warm, naked bodies touching fully. Marcus paused to glance down at her. He grinned, tempted and ready to make love to her again. Instead, he grabbed the book and moved back to his spot beside her.

Why had no one kissed her before? he wondered. Her response to their first kiss left him positive she had not been thoroughly kissed before. He pushed the thought out of his head. It didn't matter. It only made her more appealing.

She took the book from him and turned over onto her stomach, opening it on the ground. "How much time do we have?"

He lifted up on an elbow to look at her. He brushed a strand of her short hair aside so he could see her face. "Not much. I am to meet my cousin at noon on the morrow."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "So soon?"

He would rather spend every moment making love to her than spend another second looking at that book. He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"We have to get to work," Sage protested.

"I am losing patience with this book," Marcus admitted. "It seems you would rather spend time with it than me."

"Are you jealous?" she asked with a teasing smile.

"Yes!" he admitted.

"Don't you want to know what it says?"

"I'd rather discover things about you," he whispered, nuzzling her ear.

She set the book aside with a deep chuckle, and her bright eyes darkened with passion. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I thought you discovered everything about me."

"I've only just begun," he promised and kissed her lips.

## Chapter 20

**T**he sun was setting, red peppering the ground through the leaves. Marcus held Sage in his arms, content and happy. Their bodies glistened from making love. Sated, exhausted, they lay on a blanket, gazing up at the stars.

"I feel a little guilty," Sage professed.

"Guilty?" Marcus asked. "About what?"

"My sisters and I would practice our sword skills every day," she mused. "I only used my sword twice this entire time. I feel like I should at least be sharpening it."

Marcus's chest rumbled with laughter. "You are very disciplined."

"When my father wasn't around, I used to sneak away from my sisters to review the alphabet. Or practice words. That was so much more important to me."

"Why?" Marcus wondered. "Why is reading so important to you?"

Sage was silent, thinking for a long moment. Finally, she said, "When I was little, my father brought us to le Bezu. As we were going through the chateau, I saw a room with so many books, the stacks almost reached the ceiling. One book had fallen, and I picked it up. I'd never felt anything like it. The details and scrollwork that had been embossed on the cover were...beautiful. But even more beautiful was what was inside. The parchment pages were carefully inscribed with flourished letters. I discovered later that they were words and sentences and secrets." She shifted to lounge on his chest and look into his eyes. "And if I could read, I held the key to finding out those secrets. No one in my family could read."

He brushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "You don't need to read to be special. You are so unique, unlike anyone I have ever met."

She grinned in embarrassment. "I would have done anything to be unique in my family. Raven is so good with a sword. She barely needs to practice. And Willow. She is beautiful. She has this charisma that makes men fall at her feet."

"You are beautiful," Marcus whispered.

Sage shook her head. "Not like Willow."

"More than Willow."

Sage narrowed her eyes. "You've never seen her."

"I don't have to see her because you are the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

She melted into his arms and rewarded him with a deep and powerful kiss.

When they separated, he asked, "It was Brother Nicolas's room, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"The room at le Bezu with all the books."

Sage nodded. "Yes. He taught me the alphabet and a little bit more before we had to leave."

"I remember seeing that room," Marcus admitted. "He copied and translated books all day."

Sage sat and picked up the book from the leaf-hewn ground.

He wondered if she would ask him to teach her to read. He knew it wouldn't be long until she realized she *could* read. She already had the knowledge she needed to read. She just needed to sound the words out. He swiped a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. She didn't need him to teach her. And perhaps that was the reason he hadn't told her. She didn't need him as much as he needed her. He was afraid that she would leave him. Just like Cassandra had cast him aside. But Sage wasn't Cassandra.

"We should get to work decoding this book. In his honor," Sage said.

Marcus grinned. She surprised him at every turn. He couldn't resist her request. He followed her lead, and beneath the red light of the setting sun and the lengthening shadows, they began an attempt to decode the book. Marcus stood and walked to the saddlebags to retrieve the quill and ink. He returned and set them down beside her.

Sage pointed to one of the words in the book. "East. This one could be 'east.'"

Marcus seated himself beside her and looked at the word.

"And if you fill it in..." She bent and wrote on the parchment. "This word is 'road.'"

Marcus stared at it. It was as if a curtain had been pulled aside when they got the letters right. His heart hammered in his chest. She was right. It was "road."

"Something, something road east to first..."

"Crossroad," Marcus whispered, staring at the parchment in disbelief.

Sage's mouth dropped as she looked from him to the parchment. She quickly filled in the letters. "Yes!" she gasped.

"It is directions," Marcus stated, sitting up straight and gaped at her with wonder. Prickles rose up and down his spine. "You were right."

She nodded; her brown eyes crinkled with excitement. "But directions to where?"

“We need to figure out the rest of the code.” Together, they leaned over the book. They were so close to figuring it out. But their time was almost gone.



As darkness set in, lengthening the shadows and casting the surrounding forest in muted shades of black, Marcus became weary of trying to decode the book. The letters ran together, and he was exhausted. Mentally. They had interpreted some words they believed were correct.

He believed they were near to deciphering the code. He looked at Sage. Her forehead was wrinkled with concentration. She needed a break as much as he did. He ran a hand along her cheek and cupped her chin to turn her gaze to him. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

Sage pulled away. “No, no, no.” She shifted her attention back to the book as Marcus groaned in frustration. “We should stay focused. We don’t have much time.”

Marcus inclined, extending his legs out before him. He blinked purposely, trying to clear his mind of the fog encompassing it from working too long on the book. His gaze moved in a semicircle around the landscape, grateful for something other than parchment pages to stare at. A gentle breeze snaked through the tall trees, moving their branches like fingers. Long shadows that could hide assassins speckled the forest. “I think we need a break.” He reached out and eased the book closed.

She glanced at him, confused as if she had just woken from a sound sleep. Reluctantly, she set the book aside and stood, arching her back. “Maybe it’s not directions. None of the other words fit.”

Marcus stood and lifted his hands above his head, stretching. “Maybe.”

“That’s why we should keep decoding the book.”

He took her hand and guided her away from the book to the saddlebags. He appreciated her dedication, but it was too much for one lovely girl. He opened one of the saddlebags and pulled out a small trencher. He ripped it in half and gave her one piece.

She accepted it, chewing thoughtfully. “Does your cousin know you are trying to decipher the book?”

Marcus shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t want you to know what’s in it.” She swallowed.



“He’ll be happy I wanted to help him.” Marcus took a bite of the soft bread. “I was hoping he would give me more coin if I deciphered it.”

“For Rose.” Sage agreed with a nod. She stared down in contemplation at the trencher. “I keep wondering who hired the attackers.”

He knew who she thought hired the attackers: Guillume. “My cousin is family to me. We were very close growing up, but we went our separate ways after our schooling. I was happy to receive the missive from him and even happier to see him.” He bit some bread from the loaf, remembering their warm greeting. It had been in the same inn where he was going to meet Guillume on the morrow. They both had ales and talked for a few moments before Guillume had asked him to retrieve the book. But Marcus had to admit that he didn’t feel the same connection to Guillume now as he had when they were young. That didn’t change anything. He glanced at Sage, admitting, “I envy your closeness with your family.”

Sage scoffed. “Sometimes, it’s wonderful. My sisters would do anything for me. But it was also very suffocating. We were always together. This is the longest I’ve ever been away from them.”

“They must be very worried about you,” Marcus mused.

Sage looked down.

“Would they...” Marcus began but stopped. He didn’t want to insult her.

“Would they what?” Sage demanded, regarding him with her piercing brown eyes.

Marcus took a deep breath. “Would they hire assassins to kill me?”

Sage’s mouth dropped, and then she snapped it closed in indignation. “Never. They would want to finish the job themselves.”

Marcus grinned, nodding. “It was just a thought.” When she remained stubbornly silent, her lips tight and jaw clenched, he added, “Now you know how I feel with your accusations about Guillume.”

She chuckled humorlessly. “I see your point.”

“I know you think Guillume could have done it, but I’m telling you he did not hire those men. He wouldn’t try to kill me. I’m bringing the book to him. I pose no threat to him.”

Sage bobbed her head placatingly. “Unless he thinks you’re not going to give it to him.”

Marcus sighed in frustration. “Why would he think that? We’re on the way to meet him. It doesn’t make sense. It makes more sense that someone else hired those men. Someone who didn’t hire me. Someone else who wants the book.” He waved the matter away, done arguing his point with her. He placed the remaining trencher in his mouth. “This is really good. When we are finished, we should return to le

Carla and have a decent meal.”

Sage gaped at him with a strange expression on her face.

“What?” Marcus asked, pulling back. “Did I say something wrong? Don’t you want to go back?”

“You said ‘we.’”

Marcus straightened. He had said it. He was disclosing that he wanted her with him. And he did. But suddenly, his confidence waned.

A smile spread across Sage’s face. “You want to stay with me?”

Marcus opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He was not certain she would want to stay with him. He bowed his head and licked his lips. “We’ll have to see how everything turns out.”

Sage’s smile didn’t vanish, and her eyebrow rose. “I guess we will.”

Uneasily, uncertainly, Marcus began pulling on his breeches and then his boots.

“Where are you going?” Sage asked.

“I’m going to make a round of the forest to check for...unwanted guests,” Marcus admitted.

Sage nodded and returned to sit on the blanket. She picked up the book.

“Would you like to come with me?” Marcus added.

“No. I’ll continue working on the book.”



Even though Sage stared at the open book, her mind refused to focus on the parchment pages, on decoding, on the words. Instead, it continued to drift to Marcus. He was so handsome and strong. His golden hair and blue eyes made her body flame to life. The way he regarded at her gave her a delicious anticipatory thrill.

She smiled to herself, remembering his promise. He had said they would return to William’s farm. He was including her in his future.

She eased the book closed and embraced it. Never in her life had she felt so...vibrant. So beautiful. Marcus made her feel that way, and she would be forever grateful to him. She slowly lowered the book, thinking of his lips on hers and his strong physique. She ran her finger over the leather, recalling the firm feeling of his skin beneath her fingers.

Her fingers trailed over a raised part of the leather. She moved her hand aside to see an embossed flower in the corner of the book. It took up a quarter of the leather, and she wondered why she hadn’t noticed it earlier. She ran her fingertips over it, feeling the raised and

lowered markings. It was lovely. Willow would like it.

She took one piece of parchment and lay it flat over the etching. She looked around her on the dirt floor of the forest for a dark, small stone. There were few, and she had to sweep leaves and sticks aside in her search. Finally, she found one buried in the dirt. She dug it out, brushed off the soil, and lightly began to run it across the flower. She tried to carefully get each detail. The more elaborate, the more Willow would appreciate it. She pressed the parchment over it.

She heard the rustling of leaves and glanced up. Marcus came toward her through the trees. Her breath caught. He was marvelous to look at, like a god from olden times. Chiseled features, strong and breathtaking. Each step was purposeful and full of power. His eyes were trained on her with a heated focus.

“Have you worked anything out?” he asked as he neared.

She swallowed heavily, attempting to control her immediate reaction to his nearness. “No. But I did find this beautiful flower in the corner that I think Willow will like.” She showed him the image she had transferred.

Marcus nodded but was clearly not interested in the tracing.

“Any sign of trouble?” Sage asked as he sat beside her.

Marcus shook his head, his eyes sweeping over her face with a hungry look.

Sage’s body reacted instantly, her senses heightening. Tingles spread over her skin. Passion erupted through her body, and she dropped the parchment and book to launch herself into Marcus’s arms.

He caught her with a low chuckle, and then his lips found hers.

The book fell into the leaves, forgotten.

# Chapter 21

The next morning, they packed up in silence. Marcus couldn't help casting furtive, quick glances. Lord, she was beautiful. Sultry. And smart. He never wanted to let her go. And that worried him.

He tried to concentrate on the upcoming meeting with Guillaume. He planned to hand the book over and leave. But he didn't want Guillaume to see Sage. Just as he hadn't wanted Guillaume to know about Rose. He thought about the fact he hadn't told Guillaume about Rose, and it struck him that perhaps he and his cousin were not as close as he thought.

He stared at Sage again as she rolled the blanket up. It would be safer for her to wait here for him. The assassin would follow him into town and leave her alone. After all, the killer was after the book, and he would have it.

"Are you well?" she asked.

He inhaled a deep breath and straightened. "I'd like you to wait for me here."

“Here?” Sage asked with a frown of disapproval as she approached with the blanket. “It’s a long ride to Les Labadous. I’m not staying here.”

Marcus took the blanket from her and shoved it into one of the bags. He wrapped his hands around her, gathering her close, his gaze trailing over her hair. She had already lost some of her hair. He couldn't risk her losing her life. "Why haven't you asked me to teach you to read?" Marcus wondered.

Sage shrugged. “I thought it was more important that we decode the book, which we haven’t finished. You can finish teaching me to read anytime.”

Marcus ran his fingers along her cheek. "You already know how to read. There is nothing further I can teach you."

Her brows rose in surprise and then slowly lowered to a scowl. She stared at him for a long moment, and something guarded passed over her features.

Marcus couldn't tell if it was relief or something else. "We had a deal. You wouldn't try to escape if I taught you to read. Our deal is finished."

"I'm not staying with you because of a deal," she said and stepped

away from him. "Besides, I don't know how to read."

She must be toying with him, he was certain. She *did* know how to read. And she knew it. She must.

"You've always known how to read, how to sound words out. You know how to read. You just need to have faith in your abilities."

She shook her head. "No. You said you would teach me. Write something on the ground." She signaled a spot on the forest floor. "Here. If I can read it, I will wait here. If I can't, I will go with you."

Marcus's gaze swept over her soft, determined features. He nodded. He bent and picked up a branch. What to write? He wanted to write "I love you." But he wasn't certain how she would react. He could pick words that were difficult to figure out or words that were simple. He hesitated, staring at the stick. There was still an assassin out there looking for the book. It would be dangerous for Sage to come into the town with him.

He wrote on the ground, read the words, and then nodded.

*The sky is blue.*

Sage gazed down at the words for a long moment.

Marcus tossed the stick aside and waited.

"The," Sage proclaimed, reading the word.

Marcus knew she knew that word.

Her lips moved as she sounded the second word out. "Sky."

He nodded.

"Is," she read. "The sky is."

She *could* read. He was right. He couldn't help the feelings of pride and admiration swelling in his chest.

Her lips formed the word as she sounded the last one out.

It was simple. Logical. All she had to do was read the first three letters, and she would know the word. She would wait here for him. Relief swept over him. At least, he wouldn't have to worry about her. He could concentrate on getting rid of the book.

She grimaced, her lips silently creating the sounds. "*Bl-E?*" she said. "*Bleh?*" She shook her head and turned to face him. "I can't read it. I don't know what it says."

Shocked, Marcus gaped at her. He was positive she knew the word. He closed his mouth. "You know what that word is."

"No," she insisted.

But he saw the mischief in her eyes. "Sage," he pleaded. "I'm doing this for your safety."

"And I want to come for yours," she insisted. "Your cousin doesn't know about me. I can watch your back!"

"But the assassin does," Marcus said firmly. "It will be all I can do to keep myself safe. I don't want to be distracted by you."

Sage looked torn.

Marcus stepped up to her and cupped her face in his hands. "Wait here for me. I'll be back, and we can discuss finding your family."

Sage glanced down. "I didn't decode the book," she said softly.

"It doesn't matter," Marcus admitted. "My treasure is right here." He slowly lowered his lips to hers, relishing the feel of her kiss, her tongue, her skin.

When he pulled back, she said, "I could have done it. I know it. If I had one more day, I'm certain I could have decoded the book."

"I have no doubt you could do it if you had the time. It's a complicated process."

"I can pick locks. I can open doors. But this...this was the biggest challenge of my life. I wish I could finish it."

"I do, too," he confessed and meant it. He stepped away from her, bending to pick up the book. He looked at it for a moment. "You did your best. Perchance it was not meant for us to know what is inside."

Sage scoffed. "Every secret is meant to be discovered."

"Either way..." He moved to place the book in one of the bags hanging from his horse.

"Wait!" Sage cried. She took the book from his hands and opened it to the last page, where the parchment pages were tucked away. She removed those and handed the book back to him. "I'm not letting your cousin get anything we've worked on."

Marcus nodded and continued to put the book into the saddlebag.

Sage folded the parchment and slipped it into her boot. Then, she watched him for a moment and lifted her chin. She walked to her horse, putting the saddle on.

"What are you doing?" Marcus asked.

"I'm not waiting here," she insisted.

"Sage," Marcus growled.

"I'll accompany you to the edge of town, but I won't go in. I'll wait outside." She paused, tightening the buckles of the saddle before looking around at the forest. "I'm not staying here alone."

Marcus glanced at the trees and the bushes. Perhaps that was a wise choice. He wasn't certain that the last assassin wasn't lurking somewhere nearby. Or that there weren't others looking for them. And he didn't want to put Sage at any risk. He sighed softly and nodded.



As they approached Les Labadous, Marcus heard the shouts of the merchants down the road. He had visited long ago with Guillume. It was a peaceful town nestled amongst trees. Many traders stopped

there on their way to the village of Rennes le Chateau and the citadel. It was here Guillaume had promised to meet him when he got the book. Marcus couldn't help feeling disappointed in himself. He had meant to decode the book, and they were close, he could feel it. But he hadn't done it.

There were people all around, traveling in and out of the town. An assassin would not attempt anything out in the open.

Marcus looked over his shoulder at Sage. She glanced around at the surrounding grassy field. He watched her for a moment. The sun shone down on her shoulders. The ends of her short brown locks were beginning to curl. His heart ached. He drew his horse to a halt.

Sage's horse stopped, and she shifted to him.

"We're here," Marcus announced.

She scanned the road toward the town. "Can I wait at the inn to get some ale?"

Marcus patted one of the saddlebags. "If you're thirsty, we have ale."

She swiveled her gaze to the town again. Worry creased her brow. "I think I should go with you."

"Sage," Marcus warned in a low voice. "There's no reason for you to come with me. I will give the book to Guillaume and meet you back here. Nothing will happen."

She chewed her lower lip thoughtfully. Her horse danced beneath her anxiously.

Marcus urged his horse beside hers. "It will be well. You'll see." With a spur, he drove his horse down the road. "I will be back."

He rode forward, casting one last look back at her. She sat on her horse, watching him with apprehension beneath the leaves of a tree. He half waved.

She didn't move.

He quickly looked ahead. He didn't like leaving her. But this would all be over as soon as he rid himself of this book. The faster, the better. Then he could return to her. He cantered his horse into the town.

As he entered, merchants called out to the patrons.

"A candle that will last a fortnight!" a woman, with dark hair and a stained apron, exclaimed from her position behind a small stand.

"The sweetest bread you've ever tasted!" a fat man, with crumbs in his dark beard, proclaimed from the doorway of a shop.

The well-trodden dirt street was crowded. Farmers strolled past him, carrying baskets of vegetables. A child dodged through the legs of people, chasing a duck. A woman shouted a name from the doorway of a wattle and daub house.

Marcus scanned the road and houses lining it. He didn't see any

sign of guards or assassins or Templar knights. He had been watchful ever since they left the cave, searching for the last assassin.

Now, he recalled how he and Guillume used to play knights in the field beside the inn, the inn where he was now heading to meet his cousin. When they were children, Guillume had to be the one to find the treasure. Once, Guillume wouldn't play with him for days after Marcus had defeated him in mock battle.

Guillume always had to win.

Prickles danced up Marcus's arms even though the sun was warm. His instincts had told him not to tell Guillume about Rose. And he had followed those instincts without really knowing why. Unease spread through him. He rode through the throng of villagers and merchants, scanning the surrounding area.

The sounds of the merchants faded, and the street emptied of people as he rode down the street. He past cottages and farms. He was approaching the outskirts of the town. Marcus saw the inn in the distance. A one-story wooden structure. The Dragon's Den.

He examined the area as he approached, looking for anything unusual. Anxiety tightened the muscles in his back. Marcus cursed silently. What was he worried about? Nothing was going to happen. He was going to give the book to Guillume, get his payment, and leave. That was it. But why were his fists clenched around the reins? Why was he tense with warning? It must be because Sage had put thoughts in his mind—thoughts about Guillume hiring men to kill him. It had tainted his thoughts about his cousin.

He continued to the inn. But his mind wandered back to Sage, waiting patiently for him outside the town. And then, he realized his mistake. The Sage he knew would never wait patiently for anything. He shifted in the saddle to look over his shoulder, half-expecting to find her on the road behind him.

The road was empty.

He considered returning to make sure she was safe but then decided otherwise. He had to finish his task. Once he was no longer in possession of the book, it would be over, and they would be free and safe from the assassin.

He led his horse around the back of the inn. As soon as he turned the corner, he saw a white horse tied to a tree's branch in the back. He glanced at the stable across the yard from the inn. It had a roof to shelter the animals, but the side was open. There were horses in the stables, but he would never be able to tell if they belonged to an assassin or other patrons in the inn.

He brought his horse to a tree next to the white horse and dismounted. He wrapped the reins around a branch, scanning the area for others. Guillume must be inside waiting. His gaze lingered on the



stables. There were plenty of dark spaces for an assassin to hide in. His stare centered on the stables. Unease crawled up his spine. Something didn't feel quite right.

He reached into one of the saddlebags and pulled out the book. He cast another glance at the stables. Trepidation filled him, yet he resolutely walked toward the inn door.

As he approached, the door suddenly flung open.

Marcus pulled back, his hand instinctively going to the pommel of his sword, his body tensing. A man with dark bowl-cut hair stepped from the inn. His mustache drooped over his pointed beard. Marcus relaxed.

"Guillume," he whispered.

## Chapter 22

Sage watched until Marcus disappeared into the crowd of people. She waited until she could no longer see him, and then she waited for one moment more. She took a deep, determined breath and spurred her horse into a slow walk. She wasn't going to sit outside and wait until he returned. She had to be there in case he needed her. In case something went wrong. She hoped nothing did. But, as her father always said, it never hurt to have a second plan.

Once inside, she was engulfed in a sea of merchants and farmers moving about their daily business. She didn't like the crowd and quickly veered off to a side street, steering her steed around the cottages to the empty fields behind them. Many fields had already been harvested.

She knew Marcus was heading to the inn on the outskirts of the town. She rode on slowly. The farther she went, the more cautious she became. She saw farmers working in the field as she passed. One stopped to look at her as he wiped his brow.

She rode closer to him. "Excuse me. Can you tell me where the inn is?"

The farmer pointed east and closer to the main road.

Sage nodded her thanks. "Be careful. You don't want your skin to blister from the sun."

He grunted. "And you be careful. There's an empty barn down there." He indicated the direction she was traveling. "It's haunted."

Sage grinned and urged her horse on. She didn't believe in ghosts. But she did believe a barn said to be haunted would make a perfect hiding place for an assassin. She looked for the structure as she rode, scanning the fields and forest edge.

As she continued riding, she heard a distant name called. She looked toward the voice. A woman stood in one of the fields, yelling to a farmer. Birds chirped from the forest.

Sage moved around the fields, careful not to let her horse trample what little crops remained. She urged the horse into a canter. She felt a growing urgency to find Marcus.

She saw the barn to her left. It appeared to be a dilapidated wooden structure. Maybe it was once used to house animals, or as a place to store crops. Part of the roof was collapsed, and weeds grew wild around it. She wished she had time to search it, but she wanted

to make sure Marcus was safe.

She continued by toward the direction the farmer had directed until she saw the inn.



“Marcus,” Guillume greeted. “Where have you been? You are late.”

“Assassins attacked me,” Marcus replied. He was happy to see Guillume. Relief swept through him. No more assassins. No more book. He held his hand out to greet his cousin. “Good to see you, cousin.”

Guillume’s eyes swept Marcus, lingering hungrily on the book for a moment, and then he clasped his arm warmly. “Apparently, the assassins were not too good.”

Marcus lifted his chin. “Or I’ve improved.”

Guillume chuckled. “Against four assassins? I don’t think you are that skilled.” He stepped into the yard, placing an arm about Marcus’s shoulders.

Anxiety shot through Marcus. How had Guillume known there were four assassins?

Two men exited the inn, walking past them toward the stables.

Marcus turned to watch them cross the yard.

“I see you have acquired the book,” Guillume said, drawing Marcus’s attention. “Well done.”

“It’s in code,” Marcus explained. “What is in the book?”

Guillume shrugged. “I won’t know until it is decoded.”

Marcus scowled. “Then why send me after it? How did you know it was important?”

Guillume slapped Marcus on the shoulder. “You always had too many questions for your own good. It is better you do not know.” He held his hand out palm up for the book. “Just know that it is important.”

Marcus looked at his cousin’s open hand and gave him the book without hesitation.

Guillume’s fingers wrapped around the leather cover, and he stroked it victoriously.

Marcus glanced at the stables to see two others had joined the two men who had passed them. Where had these men come from? Were they hiding in the stables as he had presumed?

“Marcus,” Guillume said, opening the book and perusing the pages. “I am grateful you found this. When I received word you had found it, my joy was unequalled.”

“We are family, Guill. Of course, I would do this for you. Did you doubt me?”

“I didn’t think you would be successful.”

The remark wounded Marcus. He had risked his life for that book.

Guillume stared at him for a long moment. “When I was tasked with finding this book, I debated giving the responsibility to you.”

Marcus felt a twinge of hurt burn through his chest but then realized that Guillume always spoke to him like this, in a degrading way. Always making himself seem better than Marcus.

“But in the end, I decided you were the perfect one. No real friends. No family ties. No connections.” Guillume took a step away from him. “And yes, you are technically family. But sometimes, sacrifices have to be made for the good of all.”

Marcus frowned. What was he talking about? He didn’t like the way Guillume spoke. “We are more than just family. We are friends.”

The four men moved toward Marcus across the yard.

“Friends?” Guillume asked, his eyebrows raising. “We have never been friends.”

Stunned, Marcus gaped at him. “We went to school together. We trained together. We were inseparable.”

“Inseparable? Lord! What I wouldn’t have done to get rid of you. I was tolerant of you because you are family. You are weak and unambitious. But you served your purpose.”

*Purpose?* Dread spread through Marcus. “What purpose?”

Guillume held the book up in front of him. “This purpose.”

Disbelief washed through Marcus. Guillume had used him to get the book. He had played on his loyalty and blood ties. Marcus had defended him from everyone’s accusations.

And he had been wrong.

Now everything was clear to him. “You sent the assassins.”

Guillume tilted his head in sympathy. “Imagine my surprise when you defeated them.” He glanced at the four men approaching. “But you will not escape trained soldiers.”

“Why? Why are you doing this? I gave you what you wanted. You have the book.”

“There are others looking for this book, and no one can know that I have it. There can be no witnesses,” Guillume answered coldly. “Not even family.”

Marcus’s teeth clenched. Betrayed. Deceived by the one person he thought he could count on. By his family. Over a damned book that he couldn’t even decipher. He stumbled back.

Movement near the side of the inn caught his attention. He saw Sage peering around the corner of the inn. Although he saw her from where he stood, the soldiers closing in could not. *Sage!* What was she

doing here?

Desperation flooded through Marcus. She would be hurt. He would not sacrifice her. He shook his head slightly, signaling her to stay back.

Her hand went to her sword.

*No, no, no!* She was going to fight. His insides tightened with fear and anxiety. He couldn't risk her life. Not again.

Guillume reached for his weapon.

Marcus glanced at him. He still held that damned black book tightly. The only thing important to Guillume—more important than his own family.

Anger surged through Marcus, and he rushed toward Guillume, grasping the book. He ripped it free of Guillume's startled hold and launched it into the air toward Sage, yelling, "Run!"

## Chapter 23

**T**he treasured book flew end over end through the air. Guillume's gaze followed the path of Marcus's toss.

The soldiers watched the book sail above their heads.

Sage caught the book. Marcus's shout rang in her ears. *Run!* Her chest squeezed, and agony clawed at her as she shook her head to deny his request. Everyone was looking at her.

For a moment, no one moved. Marcus all but shook with intensity as he stared at her in despair. Then he moved, surging toward her. The soldiers caught his arms before he could take more than a step, restraining him.

Sage jerked to go to his aid.

"Get her!" Guillume shouted.

She froze as two of the soldiers broke away from the struggle with Marcus to race toward her.

"Run!" Marcus called between clenched teeth. The soldiers pushed him to his knees and then to the ground, shoving his face into the dirt.

Sage pulled her sword partially from the sheath when she spotted more soldiers emerging from the inn. There were too many for her to fight. Her father had taught her to know when to retreat. Still, every one of her instincts wanted to go to Marcus's aid, wanted to battle her way through to his side.

The soldiers raced toward her, closing the distance with their swords out.

She met Marcus's gaze. Desperate fear glimmered in his stare. She knew when she couldn't win a fight, and this was one of those times. Reluctantly, she turned away from him. She had to remain free, so she could save him. She had to keep the book out of their hands. It was the only thing that would save Marcus's life.

She dashed around the side of the inn to her horse, shoving the book into her armor. As she snatched the reins free from a branch, the soldiers rounded the corner and charged toward her.

She swung herself up into the saddle. She was an expert rider, but this was not her horse. She didn't know if it would panic or rear at her hasty commands. Still, she could control horses and certainly knew how to escape some paid oafs. One reached her and grabbed her leg as she spurred the steed forward. She swung the horse around, knocking

into the soldier, sending him to the ground. The second one reached her, but the horse took off, charging toward the road. She leaned over the horse's neck, urging it faster.

She hated to leave Marcus. She wanted to return to him and make sure he was safe, that his cousin had not harmed him. She grimaced. She had been right about Guillaume. But that wasn't important right now. She was certain his cousin would send men after her.

As if on cue, she heard horses behind her. She twisted in the saddle to see two soldiers on horses chasing after her.

She hated to be right all the time.

Sage urged the horse forward, her body moving in cadence with the animal. She needed a distraction; she needed a crowd of people. She turned the horse into the clearing at the side of the road and headed back into town. She could never outrace them. Well, she could if she tried. The problem was, she wanted to get back to Marcus.

They chased her through a farmer's field. She heard one farmer shout angrily as the soldiers trampled over his crops. She guided the horse back onto the road toward the town and the market. As soon as she hit the road, she spurred the horse, driving it faster. She had to make it into the town before they did.

Faster. She leaned low in the saddle. The wind whooshed in her ears in rhythm with the mad beating of her heart. Her mind drifted for an instant to Marcus. His face shoved into the dirt, twisting to watch her with concern marring his brow. He had been more worried about her than his welfare. Her jaw clenched. If they hurt him... She shook her head. *Stay focused.*

The town came into view. The crowded street was her avenue of escape. She remembered when her father had taught her this move, years ago. It was difficult for Willow to learn at first. She didn't like frightening the villagers. Sage had been shocked that her father would scare the townspeople to escape. But sometimes, it was necessary. Only now, when her life was threatened, did she truly understand how necessary.

*Closer.*

A thin merchant looked up at her from behind his brightly colored cart as she galloped full speed down the road, her steed kicking up dirt behind her.

"Don't be afraid," her father had said. "No one will get hurt if you control the horse."

And if she couldn't control the horse, there might be an accident, and the soldiers might catch up to her. And Marcus might be killed. Anxiety churned inside of her, tightening her stomach.

*A little bit farther.*

A villager yelled at her to slow down. Other villagers and

merchants looked at her as she hurtled nearer. Someone ahead waved their arms. One of the merchants began scooping up his wares.

*Don't worry about the soldiers. Keep going. Keep going.*

When she passed the house closest to the market, she reined the horse in hard, steering it between two houses. A sharp left. Her leg brushed the second house. Her father would have made it without coming that close. But it was good enough. Her horse slowed but didn't stop, and for that, she was grateful. She kicked the horse to spur it faster. The mud and wattle house blurred by until she came to the rear of the house, where she turned the horse right.

Calls and shouts rose from the street behind her as the soldiers neared.

She drove the horse forward, but not quite as fast as before. She scanned the area for somewhere to hide. Houses and shops lined the street. A small garden was behind one of the houses. A blanket hung on a line to dry behind another. She spotted a horse tied to a tree branch at the back of one of the houses. She quickly rode over to the horse, dismounted, and flipped the reins around the branch, beside the other horse. She dashed between two of the adjacent buildings. One was a house and the other, a baker's shop. The delicious scent of fresh bread wafted through the air.

She patted her hair and took deep breaths to calm her breathing. She needed to appear like a patron. Just looking at the wares. Composed. Not running from killer soldiers. She swallowed as she emerged into the crowded street, stopping to gaze at a vendor's stand of vegetables. She nodded to the woman with long dark hair and continued. Subtly glancing down the street at the spot where she had turned between the buildings, Sage saw one of the soldiers arguing with a merchant whose fabrics were strewn on the ground.

Sage smiled to herself. That soldier hadn't made the turn. Where was the other one?

She moved through the packed market, crossing the dirt street. A cart full of hay came toward her, and she jogged out of the way. As it passed, she scanned the area. No soldier. Had he found her horse? It didn't matter. She had the book, and she...

And then, she spotted the soldier. One house down the street, sitting atop his horse, searching the mass of people with his eyes. She knew it was him by the direction he was coming from, and by the leather armor he wore.

Sage advanced quickly to a vendor's stand with a yellow awning over the top, pretending to look at the candles on display.

"This one smells like lavender," the plump merchant explained to her.

She bobbed her head and shifted her gaze to the soldier who



pushed his horse forward to enter the congested road. She lifted the candle to her nose and inhaled, all the while watching the soldier. Again, she nodded at the merchant, smiling. "Lavender." She put the candle down as the soldier came closer. She stepped behind the cloth covering so the soldier wouldn't see her and pointed to another candle. "Does that one smell?"

The soldier stopped his horse in the street one merchant's stand away from Sage. He bent over and grabbed one of the farmers by the tunic, pulling him near. "Have you seen a woman with short, dark hair?" he demanded.

Sage touched her trimmed locks. She had never thought her hair would give her away.

"This one?" the merchant asked, picking up the candle Sage was looking at. He glanced at the soldier. "No. No. This one is for light. It will last a very long time." His voice trailed off as he watched the soldier shake the farmer.

"No," the farmer in the soldier's grasp responded fearfully.

The soldier shoved the farmer away with a grimace, and the man tumbled to the ground. He quickly stood and rushed away.

The plump merchant glanced at Sage, his gaze pausing on her hair. "Ruffians," he whispered in contempt. "That's all those soldiers are."

Sage nodded. Her stare perused the candles. "I'll have to ask my husband," she said. She had learned long ago that asking one's husband first was an acceptable answer to not purchasing anything. It usually enraged her, but now, it helped her.

She saw the belly and legs of the soldier's horse below the awning as it turned and headed for the other soldier. The fabric vendor was gone, all the bolts of cloth gathered from the dirty street.

Sage knew the soldiers were not going to give up that easily. She had to get out of that town. But she was not leaving Marcus behind. She needed to find somewhere she could observe the inn.

Keeping an eye on the soldiers, she circled one of the shops. When the soldiers were speaking, she crossed the crowded street to move back towards her horse. She hesitated at the side of a brick building, watching Guillaume's men speak in the distance near the entrance to the market. She glanced at the vegetables on the cart before her, trying to blend in. She peered at the soldiers. The one on horseback scanned the street and Sage pulled back behind the brick wall of the house.

She waited a moment and leaned out far enough to see the soldier on the horse galloping away toward the inn. The other guard was speaking to one of the merchants, continuing the search.

Sage walked casually back to the rear of the house, so as not to draw attention to herself. Her horse was still tethered to the tree. Her

plan had worked.

Now, it was up to her to figure out how to save Marcus.

## Chapter 24

**T**he impact resounded through the main room of Marcus's head snapped to the side with the movement. He shook it to clear the throbbing in his mind and turned his head, spitting blood. His hands were tied behind his back; his lower lip, fat from a blow one of the soldiers delivered; his eye, swollen closed.

The soldier who had hit him stepped back, and Guillume leaned close to Marcus. "Where did she go?"

Marcus sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. Not that he would tell them, even if he did know. He waited for another blow. "It doesn't matter how many times you hit me. I can't tell you what I don't know." He met Guillume's detestable glare with one of his own. Hate boiled in Marcus's blood. Traitor. He had believed in his cousin. He had trusted him. But Sage had been right.

Sage. His entire body ached for her. He was sorry for getting her involved in this. Lord, he hoped she'd got away. He hoped she took the book and ran. He hoped she would not come back. He almost laughed out loud. Just when he thought his future looked bright, just when he believed his luck was finally changing, it was all taken away from him. Now, he simply hoped to survive.

Still, his mind dwelled on Sage. The thought of never seeing her again caused him more agony than all the beatings the toothless soldier had delivered.

The back door opened, and another soldier entered the room.

Guillume walked over to the man. "Where is she?"

Marcus turned his head and bent in slightly to hear what the guard said. He held his breath, waiting for another soldier to haul Sage in.

Instead, the soldier shook his head. "She eluded us."

"Eluded you?" Guillume said from between clenched teeth.

Happiness and pride erupted inside Marcus, and he couldn't help the grin that formed on his lips.

"Yes, m'lord. She escaped. She entered the village and...disappeared," the soldier explained.

Sage had got away. She had the book, and she had disappeared. He was proud of her, and he was relieved they had not been able to capture her. She was clever. And well trained. For that, he was grateful.

“Disappeared?” Guillume roared. He shoved the soldier back, furious. “Find her. Find her now. I want that book. Do you understand? Find her!”

“Yes, m’lord,” the soldier said and hurried out of the inn.

Guillume stood stiffly with his fists balled, glaring after the soldier.

Marcus could almost see the steam rising from his flesh. He smiled around his fat lip, relishing Guillume’s defeat. If they hadn’t found Sage by now, she was long gone. Hopefully, she was traveling back toward le Bezu to meet with her sisters. Marcus’s joy faded as the realization hit him that he wouldn’t be there when she finally decoded the book. He wouldn’t be there when she saw her family again. He wouldn’t be there, ever.

His heart ached to see her one last time because he knew his future looked grim.



The sun was setting as Sage walked through the forest to locate the perfect place to observe the inn. She had left her horse tethered behind a group of tight trees nearby in case she needed to make a quick escape. She moved cautiously around the bushes and trees; her booted feet softly crunched on fallen leaves and twigs. She slowed as the inn came into view. She crouched down, studying the front of the inn. When she saw no movement, she carefully dashed from tree to tree until she could also see the stables at the rear of the inn.

When she came to a spot where she could observe both the stables and the inn’s back door, she knelt in the brush behind a tree. She scanned the area; the yard was empty, and there was no sign of Marcus. I should move closer, she thought and was about to step from her hiding place when a soldier emerged from the cover of the stables.

She squatted behind the brush and watched him until he disappeared into the inn. Then, she looked back at the wooden stables. She could make out the rumps of the horses in their stalls, but she couldn’t see all the way inside. Was the soldier tending to his horse, or was that where they were holding Marcus? She had every intention of releasing him. But there were too many soldiers for her to battle. She had to be patient and wait for the right moment, even though every one of her irrational senses was telling her to run in and fight them all to free him.

A fleeting thought crossed her mind. What if they had killed Marcus?

Anguish and desperation paralyzed her, but before it could

consume her, she shoved the feelings aside and used her rational mind to think. Guillume would keep him alive until the book was returned; she was certain. Marcus would be useful either to discover her whereabouts or as bait. At least, that was what she would do if she were in Guillume's shoes. She had to believe Guillume would do the same thing.

The back door of the inn opened, and two soldiers dragged a man out into the yard.

*Marcus!* Sage sat up straight, straining to see. Anxiety filled her. Her heart pounded.

Marcus stumbled, and the soldiers held him tightly, one at either side, pulling him across the dusty yard to the stables.

He looked hurt. Possibly beaten. Fury boiled her blood, and she clenched her jaw, vowing revenge. They must have questioned him and not liked the answers.

She watched through the leaves of the trees as they ushered him into the stables. She shook her head. She had tried to warn Marcus not to trust his cousin. She sighed softly. But she couldn't blame him. She would never have doubted her family. What kind of man was this Guillume to betray a family member?

Ruthless. Greedy. Power-hungry.

The soldiers walked out of the stables without Marcus. Sage scowled. Had they killed him? Distress bubbled inside her, but she firmly pushed it down. She didn't know what they had done to him. But the image of them beating Marcus made her feel angry. And helpless. Shaking with the thought of the soldiers harming Marcus, she took a deep breath to calm her emotions. She knew she had to wait for the right time. It would do her and Marcus no good if they were both captured.

One soldier took up a position in front of the stables, and the other moved around the side of the inn. If they were guarding the stable, Marcus was not dead. Relief swept through her.

Her gaze centered on the stables and the one soldier. How long would Guillume wait here before he took Marcus somewhere else? When should she act? And how was she going to get Marcus away from them?

She observed the inn until the sun was at the edge of the horizon before settling in at her hiding spot behind the trees. She pulled the book from her armor and stared at it. A simple leather-bound book. She had seen many at le Bezu. This was what Guillume wanted. Why? What was so important that he would betray a family member? That he would try to kill Marcus? Frustrated, she shook her head. And why couldn't she crack the code?

She had to keep busy. Occupy her mind. Come up with a plan.

And yet, the book called to her. As if an itch she couldn't quite reach, it annoyed her. She should be able to figure out the code. What was wrong with her? She knew exactly why she couldn't decipher the book. Her mind was distracted with kisses and touches. The way Marcus's lips moved over her skin and the way he looked at her.

She glanced at the stables again. Nightfall would be her best chance to sneak up on them. She would have to delay any action until it was dark.

She pulled the parchment with the code from her boot and studied it. She straightened the parchment out on the ground, running her hands over it to smooth it. She focused with a frown, gazing at the list of letters she had written on the parchment. Beside these letters were letters she and Marcus had decoded or believed they had. A dash was drawn through some letters and a new letter written beside it because they had discovered their first guess was wrong.

She scanned the list. So many letters were still to be decoded. So many... And then something caught her attention.

Three of the letters in the center of the list that they had deciphered correlated to *X-Y-Z*. They were consecutive. *X-Y-Z*. Just as in the alphabet. What if the other letters were in alphabetical order?

Damn it. Her quill was in the saddlebags on the horse. She glanced longingly through the branches of trees in the direction the horse was hidden. Then, she looked back at the stable. She couldn't leave in case they moved Marcus.

The sun was setting. Her light was fading. She didn't have a lot of time.

She glanced back at the parchment with the code on it. Her pulse quickened in excitement. Could she be right? She focused on the first word in the text on the parchment. They had decoded three of the four letters but had not figured out the final one. The undeciphered letter was a *Q*. *T, A, blank, E*.

She went through the code on the parchment and mentally said the alphabet until she got to the *Q*. If that letter made a word... But she couldn't jump ahead of herself. She forced herself to relax by taking a deep breath. She drew her finger down the letters on the parchment, mumbling the alphabet. *Q* would be...*K*. When she substituted the *K* for the *Q*, the word formed *T-A-K-E*. Her lips moved to form the sound of each letter. She had to sound it out a couple of times quietly. "Take," she said out loud. Take what?

In the second word, they had figured out two of the letters. She chewed her lower lip in thought. The two letters they had not figured out were *S* and *T*. She traced down the code again, her finger skimming each letter as she assigned them a letter of the alphabet. *S* was *M*. *T* was *N*.

She looked at the second word and substituted the letters. *M-A-I-N*. She tried to sound the word out. “Ma, I, n. Mah In.” Frustrated, she shook her head. Maybe one of the letters was silent. “Min? Man?” She scrunched up her nose. Could it be the name of a street?

“Take man road east to first crossroad,” she whispered. The book was directions!

She opened the book to the first page. The next line was “mutzn.” They had already figured out some of the letters. She knew *U* was *O*. But they had not figured out *M*. She turned back to the code parchment, wishing she had her quill. She repeated the process to find the coded letter, mumbling the alphabet. “G.” She turned back to the book. “Go,” she whispered.

The second word was longer. They had already figured out most of the letters.

She looked around on the ground until she found a rock. She carved the letters they had decoded into the ground. She had just figured out that the *T* was *N*. What was the coded letter *N*?

Her hand trembled with excitement as she traced the path over the letters to decode the *N. H*. It was *H*. She stared at the word etched into the ground. “North.”

She had done it! She had figured out the code. Exhilaration filled her. She gaped at the book. They would be able to read it all now. She had to tell Marcus.

*Marcus*. She swung her gaze back to the stables.

She wanted to rush in right then, free him, and triumphantly report her victory. She inhaled deeply, but her entire body shook with success. She wiggled her fingers and clenched her hands in an attempt to calm herself. She needed to wait and be patient.

She folded the parchment with the code and shoved it into her boot. Then, she picked up the book and gazed in triumph at the cover. She did it. She could read, and she had figured out the code. Joy and exhilaration charged her as if a fuse were lit. She replaced the book in her armor and looked at the stables. Her heart hammered in her ears. She couldn’t wait to tell Marcus. She couldn’t wait to see him.

A twig snapped behind her.

Sage froze, and her stomach dropped. Every instinct she had warned her to be careful. She turned slowly.

A soldier stood two feet from her, the tip of his sword pointed toward her. “Where is the book?”



Marcus hung his chin on his chest. Pain wracked his entire body. He had been beaten, even though he could not tell them what they wanted to know. Sage and the book were long gone. He imagined they would kill him once they realized she was not returning for him.

At least then, there would be no more pain. Yet his little Rose would never live a comfortable life. He would not be there to give coin to Emma for Rose.

He tested the rope around his wrists behind his back. He twisted his arms attempting to free his hands, but it held tightly. He glanced across the yard at the inn.

The wooden structure was dark beneath the night sky. Warm, flickering light shone from a broken beam near the bottom of the inn door.

Guillume must be furious at having had the book in his hands and then losing it. That made Marcus smile for a moment, but disappointment quickly swelled inside of him. How could he have been so wrong about his cousin? They were family! He bowed his head again. Apparently, “family” meant nothing in Guillume’s pursuit of power.

He had been so wrong.

Sage had known.

At least she had got away with the one thing that meant so much to her—the book. Lord, he missed her. He missed her insatiable curiosity and focus. He missed her warm lips and her curvy, soft body. He had given her everything he could. Freedom and that damned book. Regret filled him at the lost possibilities. He wondered what the future would have looked like if they were together. He wondered if she would have traveled the world with him. He wondered if she would have spent her life with him.

He heard footsteps entering the stables and looked up. Were the soldiers coming for him? Already? He’d thought he would have until the morning to think about his mistakes, to lament for his lost future.

But no one came forward.

He struggled to glimpse the soldiers that had been guarding him in the yard. But he could no longer see them. There had been two. Had they moved positions? Maybe he hadn’t heard footsteps after all.

He peered into the shadows of the yard, but as he twisted, agony flared up from his stomach where he had been beaten. It was to no avail anyway; dusky silhouettes stretched across the yard and filled the stable. He could barely make out the tree in the yard.

A horse in one of the stalls whinnied.

Then, a shadow separated from the black wall and came forward, blade gleaming in the light cast from the inn.



## Chapter 25

**M**arcus stiffened, preparing for the final blow. He would fight if he could. But with his hands bound, there was not much he could do to stop the fatal blow. He clenched his teeth as the shadow moved closer.

But something was off about the shadow. It was the way the shadow moved. Something in the way it held the sword alerted him.

The dark form rushed up to him. He winced, but the shadow grabbed his face in warm hands and pressed hot lips to his.

"Sage," he whispered in relief between kisses. His lip ached from the swelling and cuts, but he was willing to endure the pain to feel her touch.

"Are you well? Did they hurt you?" she demanded with concern.

He shook his head. "I'm well. A few cuts and bruises." His concern was not for himself. "What are you doing here?"

She moved behind him and sliced the rope around his wrists. "I'm freeing you."

His hands fell unbound, and both hope and concern surged within him. He was free! But Sage was here. She could be caught. Even as joy surged through him that he was free, anxiety churned beneath it. If Guillaume captured her, he would give up anything for her safety. Even the book.

"You didn't think I'd leave without you, did you?" she asked.

She was in danger. If Guillaume apprehended her... "Sage. You have to leave," he commanded, swiveling around to look at her. "They're after *me*."

"They're after me, too," she said and knelt before him to cut the rope around his ankles.

He stood up, grasping her arms. His gaze swept her face. Even in the darkness, he could see the familiar curves of her face, a face he knew well. He had never seen or felt a more beautiful thing in his life. He was so grateful she had returned but fearful at the same time. He couldn't believe she risked everything for him. "Why did you come back?"

"I couldn't leave you," she admitted with anguish. "I couldn't leave you with them. With *him*."

"But you risked your life."

She grinned and placed a hand on his cheek. "For you."

He had been wrong. It wasn't Guillaume he could trust. It was Sage. She was the one he could depend on. "I love you," he whispered before caressing her lips with his in desperate euphoria.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and deepened the kiss. It was a kiss of relief and love. She pulled back. "We don't have time. I disabled two guards, but I'm not certain how many more there are."

Marcus bobbed his head. Two soldiers had been guarding him, but he hadn't seen them recently. He wasn't certain if more had taken their place, or if they had gone inside the inn. His sore muscles and bruises protested his movements, and he clutched his abdomen and moved to one of the stalls to untether the reins of his horse. He wasn't going to let his beating prevent him from escape. He took his belt and scabbard from the steed and slid it around his waist. It felt good to have the sword with him again. Now, he wasn't defenseless. When he turned to her, she wore a large grin on her lips.

"I did it," she whispered.

He nodded. "Yes. I'm free. But we have to get out of here."

"No," Sage clarified. "The code. I figured it out."

"What?" Marcus asked, stunned.

She removed the book from her armor, displaying it to him. "I decoded it. I know what it says."

Marcus stared. Slowly, her words sunk in, a light moving through the fog. "You did it?"

Her grin turned into a full-fledged smile. "I did it. We can leave the book. We don't need it anymore."

The thought of forsaking the book to Guillaume sent anger through Marcus. "No," he snarled and shook his head vehemently. "No. I'm not giving it to him. He's not getting his hands on it."

Sage's happiness faded, and she stared at him for a moment before nodding and returning the book to her armor.

Marcus grabbed her hand, guiding her and the horse out of the stables and around the side of the inn. His mind churned. Sage had decoded the book. He longed to ask her about it, but they had to be quiet to make their escape.

Together, they silently hurried toward the road. Marcus scanned the area for movement or soldiers, anything that might give them away. Once his booted feet hit the dirt road, he felt relief.

"This way," Sage whispered, taking a step toward the town.

Marcus shook his head. They had to get away—as far away from the town as possible.

"My horse is near a group of trees," she insisted.

"We can take mine," he argued quietly.

Sage signaled him to follow with a wave of her hand and spun, jogging down the road.

Marcus clenched his teeth but followed her, clutching his side against his bruised ribs.

A few paces down the road, Sage turned off and headed into the brush toward the forest.

Marcus glanced back at the inn. He wondered how long it would be before Guillaume discovered he was gone. They should be riding hard out of the town. But he knew Guillaume would never stop searching for him or the book. He rushed after Sage.

In the moonlight, he trailed her slinking shadow around farmers' fields to the edge of the forest. His feet crunched over the branches as he led his horse around the trees. He heard the gentle rush of water and knew a river had to be close. Sage waited for him to join her.

"We should not stay in Les Labadous long," Marcus advised, casting a glance toward the inn.

Sage nodded and escorted him through a large moonlit clearing filled with tall grass.

"What did the book say?" Marcus couldn't help but ask.

Sage looked up at him, her beautiful, large brown eyes sparkling in the dim light. "It is directions."

"To where?"

"I didn't decode the entire book, so I don't know. I only decoded enough to know I was right."

"Are you sure?"

She stopped and placed a hand on her hip to stare at him in disbelief.

Marcus chuckled, and his ribs hurt. He tightened his arm around them as he held up a hand. "Sorry." He rubbed his tongue along his swollen lip thoughtfully.

She continued across the grassy plain.

She had decoded the book. He was so proud of her. He had known she could do it. Now, the book was even more valuable. "I don't understand," he finally admitted. "Why did you want to leave the book with Guillaume?"

"So he wouldn't come after you."

"I know that. But if you haven't decoded the entire book, we still need it if we want to know where it leads."

Sage grinned and sheepishly bobbed her head. "We don't need it. I copied the book."

Shock erupted inside of Marcus, and he straightened, bringing the horse to a halt. "You copied it? The entire thing? When? Where?"

Sage swiveled to him, her head bowed. "I tried to make it look like I were decoding it. Sometimes, you were sleeping. Sometimes..." She shrugged. "I started at the smithy with Gareth and Thomas."

Marcus winced in disbelief and astonishment. "You are a planner."

"I knew I was going to get away. And I wanted the book." She grinned sheepishly. "It was the perfect way."

Marcus stared at her in admiration and incredulity. He should have known she was up to something, especially in the beginning. But he had never thought she would be able to copy the entire book. She was amazing. Beautiful, focused, skilled, and ever so intelligent. He reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her to him. "Why did you come back for me? I mean, you could have escaped, and with the book."

She softly sighed as she stared up at him. "I could have. But I couldn't leave you. We're in this together now."

"It's dangerous."

"I know. I know exactly how dangerous it is." She tugged at a lock of her short hair before slowly lowering her hand to rest against his chest. "But I couldn't leave you."

"Why?" Marcus asked in anguish. "I wanted you to. I wanted you to go far away and find your family. You could have been safe. Now, we'll have to look over our shoulders. I didn't want this for you."

"All I wanted was you. I don't care about any of the rest of it."

"I care. I care that you are safe. I care that you could have gotten away. It makes me angry to think that I've put your life in danger. It makes me angry to think you came back for me."

Sage scowled.

With a gentle sigh, he admitted, "And yet I can't be angry." He brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I can't be angry because you are here with me. And I thought I would never see you again."

Sage lifted on her toes and pressed her lips to Marcus's. She nuzzled his neck affectionately. "You were wrong about Guillaume."

Marcus grunted in disgust. Then he relaxed as her gentle breath washed across his mouth before she peppered kisses over his swollen lips. It hurt, but it was a pain he would gladly endure. "I was very wrong."

"I was right," Sage whispered with a grin, pressing her body along the length of his.

Marcus tightened his arms around her. "You were right," Marcus agreed with a soft laugh. He claimed her lips in a deep kiss, tasting her, relishing her. She was a treasure. His treasure. His lip burned where it was cut, but Marcus didn't want to stop. He wanted to continue kissing her, holding her, touching her. Afraid that at any moment, she would disappear, and he would be back in the stables tied to the chair.

She nestled herself against him, holding him tightly.

He groaned, willing the agony from the blows away. But it was no use.

Sage pulled back, examining his face. "You're hurt."

"Just bruises. They didn't like that I had no idea where you were." He grinned, and his fat lip pulled. He winced and stopped. But he would suffer the pain to kiss her again.

"Let's get my horse, and I'll tend to your injuries," Sage said.

Marcus couldn't argue with that.



Sage cautiously entered the haunted barn the farmer had told her about, leading the horses. They had retrieved her horse from the spot in the forest where she had hidden it.

Marcus walked beside her, his hand wrapped around his midsection. She was worried about his injuries.

She scanned the barn. It was dark, and she couldn't see into the outer reaches of the shadows against the walls, especially where the roof had collapsed. Moonlight shone in through the broken beams. If ghosts were real, this was where they would live, she thought with a shiver.

"We can't stay here long," Marcus stated, looking around at the dilapidated barn.

Sage knew he was searching the shadows. She nodded. She didn't like lingering in one place, not with Guillaume and his soldiers after them. She knew it wouldn't be long until more soldiers were sent after them. Still, Marcus's wounds had to be cleaned and wrapped. She wanted to make sure he was able to travel. She wanted to run her hands over his flesh again.

Sage tossed the reins of the horses over a fallen beam and turned to Marcus. Moonlight gleamed in his golden hair. His shoulders sagged, and he looked exhausted, but he managed a relieved smile. She stepped up to him.

His gaze shifted to somewhere behind her, and his eyes widened. He shoved her aside and reached for his sword.

Sage landed on her stomach; the air knocked from her. She shifted to glance over her shoulder.

A shadow separated from the collapsed part of the barn and lunged toward Marcus with the tip of his sharp sword.

## Chapter 26

**S**age's cry echoed in Marcus's mind as he twisted out of the way of the lunge and began to pull his sword out. The man immediately followed up with a swing, and Marcus ducked, fully pulling his sword free.

He crossed blades with the attacker, glaring at him. This was no soldier. He must be the last assassin.

The man charged forward, arcing his weapon. Marcus's reasoning was quickly cast aside as all thought and instinct turned toward defending himself. Marcus parried the swings, the metal blades ringing out through the barn.

Marcus wore no armor and couldn't afford to miss a swing. He ignored the burning pain from his beating to concentrate on protecting himself. He didn't attack, making sure to stay out of striking distance. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sage get to her feet. He had to keep the man from Sage.

She pulled her sword from the scabbard but didn't join in the fight, even though her hand was so tight around the pommel that her knuckles were white. She was being honorable, Marcus realized, allowing the one-on-one battle. More reason for him to admire her. She gasped as the man lunged in again.

Marcus stepped aside and knocked the blow away.

The two men moved around each other carefully. Marcus tried to relax his muscles in preparation for the attack, but his side burned where Guillume's soldiers had punched him. He ignored the pain to focus on the battle. He had to win. After Sage had risked her life to come to his aid, he would not die here. He would not fail her.

The man lunged again, pushing the blade toward Marcus.

Marcus retreated, pulling back from the sharp tip. He moved around the man, who continued to jerk forward, driving Marcus into the corner.

The assassin shoved his sword forward.

Marcus dodged, but this time not fast enough. The sharp edge of the blade grazed his stomach. He grimaced in pain.

Sage gasped.

The man grinned in satisfaction.

Enough of this, Marcus angrily thought. His cousin had hired this man to kill him. *His cousin*. Marcus clenched his teeth. He planted his

feet and prepared for the man to strike. He was going to end this. Now.

The man's grin faded.

Marcus swung to his left. As the assassin brought his weapon up to parry, Marcus stabbed in, cutting his arm and slicing through his tunic.

Surprise rocked the man, and anger burned in his eyes and clenched lips.

Marcus held the sword out before him, ready for the man's attack. While he stared him in the eye, Marcus could see the assassin's body, and he watched for any movement.

The man came in quickly from Marcus's right, swinging his sword.

Marcus parried, the swords meeting and clanging through the barn. Then, Marcus countered, catching the man's blade with his own and forcing it down. He brought the handle of his sword into the man's face, knocking him backward.

The man stumbled away. Blood flowed from his nose, and he wiped a sleeve across it.

The assassin then came at him with an arcing blow. Marcus knocked it low and instantly brought the tip of his sword up, running the man through at his waist.

The assassin stood stunned for a long moment. His brow was furrowed as if in confusion.

Marcus pulled the sword free.

The man jerked and fell to one knee. He touched his side and came away with a bloodied palm. As he toppled forward, he swung his sword in a last, futile attempt to kill Marcus.

Marcus easily stepped out of the way. Breathing deeply, he stared down at the attacker.

"Marcus!" Sage cried and ran toward him, throwing her arms about him.

He caught her and hugged her fiercely.

She pulled back to look into his eyes with concern. "Are you well? You were cut." She inspected his stomach, her hands skimming over it lightly until she found the rip in his tunic. She looked at her fingers to find blood.

"It's nothing," Marcus insisted.

"Nothing?" she demanded. She glanced at the man lying in the dirt and then at Marcus. "He could have killed you."

"But he didn't," Marcus said. "We need to leave."

"But your wounds..."

"Will keep until we are far from here."

Sage scowled in disapproval. She walked to her horse and opened one of the saddlebags. She returned to him with a piece of linen. "At

least stop the bleeding.”

Marcus took the linen from her. Probably a wise decision. He lifted his tunic gingerly, ignoring the stiffness and aches from the blows he had received in his cousin’s care. He inspected the sword wound. It wasn’t bleeding badly.

“Here.” Sage uncorked the ale flask as she walked to him from the horse. She stopped before him and dumped the flask over his cut to clean it.

The cool liquid burned when it hit his open wound, and a hiss escaped his lips. He pressed the linen over the cut. “It will do. We need to leave. Now.” He walked toward his horse.

Sage looked at the dead man again. “He’s not a soldier. Who do you think he was?”

“The last assassin. I *hope*, the last one.”

Sage stared down at the dead attacker with worry. “Your cousin will never stop looking for that book.”

“No,” Marcus agreed with a sigh. Perhaps it had been a mistake not to leave the book. But after Guillume’s betrayal, Marcus did not want him to have it. Ever. He put a foot in the stirrup and grabbed the pommel of the saddle to pull himself up.

He realized Sage had not moved. He looked at her.

She stood over the assassin, looking down at him. She had removed the book from her armor and held it in her hand.

“Sage,” he called.

“He’ll never stop looking,” she murmured.

Marcus withdrew his foot from the stirrup and walked to her side. They would always be running... He hated giving her a life like this. “No. He’ll never stop looking—not for the book and not for me.”

Her frown deepened.

“Sage,” he whispered despondently. He wanted to give her more. He wanted to make her happy. “I can lead him away from you. I can —”

She turned to him, the frown on her brow gone. Her eyes were bright. “I have an idea.”

Mischief glittered in her eyes, and curiosity washed away his doubt. For the first time, he had hope. Hope that with Sage in his life, it would be more than he expected. “What idea?”

A smile bubbled on her lips. “Take off your clothes.”

Shocked, Marcus bridled.



## Chapter 27

**S**age returned to the barn to find Marcus tugging at the brown tunic he now wore—which had formerly belonged to the assassin. The tunic fell to his mid-thigh like most tunics, but the sleeves pulled tight around his biceps and shoulders. And a large red stain marred the front near his stomach. The black breeches were like a second skin around his thighs. But the clothing would do. “I moved the horses to the forest. We’re ready.”

Marcus nodded and looked up at Sage.

She gazed at the dead man stretched on his stomach on the floor. He wore Marcus’s green tunic and black breeches. She hoped her plan would work. The assassin’s blond hair pooled around his head on the straw beneath him. If they were lucky, it would be enough to fool Marcus’s cousin. She clutched the book in her hand.

Marcus glanced at the assassin and then back to Sage. “Are you certain about this?” Marcus asked.

Sage turned to him and took a deep breath, filling her lungs. “It will work,” she assured him with certainty.

Marcus grinned, his eyebrows rising in admiration. “It’s a brilliant plan.”

“Have you come to expect less from me?” she asked playfully.

He eased the book from her hands. “I know how much this book means to you.”

She recalled seeing Marcus’s face shoved into the dirt by his cousin’s men, and she clenched her jaw in anguish. She stepped forward and pressed her lips to his to relieve the torment of the memory. When she pulled back to look into his deep blue eyes, she admitted, “Not as much as you mean.”

Marcus’s stare softened, and he ran his fingers along her cheek. “How could I have gotten so lucky? I first captured you for your skill, and now you have captured my heart.”

“I love you, Marcus,” Sage whispered, shifting her head to press a kiss into his palm.

Marcus’s hand slipped to the nape of her neck, and he drew her tightly against him, claiming her lips in a searing kiss.

Tingles peppered her skin, and even though he was hurt and even though their lives were in danger, Sage felt breathlessness sweep over her. An intense need to have more of him. She groaned softly.

He pulled back, brushing a lock of her short hair behind her ear. "We'll have the rest of our lives together."

She nodded in agreement and stepped clear of him. The cool air touched her heated skin, and the space from Marcus allowed her to be rational. She opened her hand to display a piece of iron and flint. She bent and picked up some dry twigs of hay.

"The villagers think this farm is haunted," she told Marcus as she walked over to the dead assassin. She knelt beside him and put the hay on top of the flint. "We are simply dispelling the ghosts."

She struck the flint, drawing her hand down sharply with a loose wrist to produce the spark. A spark jumped into the hay, and she lifted it up, gently blowing on it until the small red ember ignited into a flame. She glanced at Marcus over the flame.

He nodded in acceptance and encouragement.

She walked up to him, carefully holding the burning straw. The flames eagerly consumed the straw. Sage stared at the book for a moment. It had brought her to Marcus, brought them together. And it was a book. It had meant so much to her at the start of this adventure. She lifted her gaze to Marcus.

Now, there was someone more important.

Marcus stretched the book out toward her like an offering.

She extended her hand forward and touched the crackling flame to the parchment pages. They flared to life as the hungry fire devoured the pages. The pages would burn, making it impossible to decode the book, but the leather binding would not. It would curl and shrivel, leaving enough evidence for Marcus's cousin to find it.

Marcus shifted the book, turning it this way and that to ignite more of the pages. The fire spread, its flicking tongues greedily encompassing the parchment. He held it until the flames were nipping at his fingers. Then he tossed it on top of the assassin.

Sage strolled to the back of the barn, cupping her hand about the burning hay. She stooped, touching the fire to some old hay on the ground. She waited until the fire ignited the hay before moving to another spot. She walked to three different locations in the barn, starting different fires before dropping the burning hay on the ground. She backed to Marcus's side, watching as the fire spread quickly across the dry straw and up the side of the wooden barn.

She glanced at the book. The leather cover blackened further as the fire inside scorched it. For a moment, she didn't think the fire would catch on the clothing or the hay around the assassin. Then, the flames crawled onto the green tunic and erupted in dancing fingers of fire.

The fire crept across the assassin's back and into the surrounding hay.

Together, she and Marcus watched as the blaze spread through the barn, crackling across the hay on the floor and ascending rotting beams.

Sage looked at the assassin. The fire was growing, claiming his corpse in its inferno.

The scent of burning flesh wafted to Sage, and she covered her nose against the stench.

Marcus took her hand and guided her away to the door of the barn. They waited as the flames sizzled and snapped, spreading eagerly across the floor to the wooden walls. The orange-and-red flames quickly scaled the walls, sending thick black smoke up to the opening in the ceiling.

Sage glanced one last time at the book. The leather cover was twisting beneath the heat, the pages charred and blackened.

It was sufficient for her. The book was gone. She hoped it would be enough for Marcus's cousin. She hoped he would believe that Marcus was dead. She squeezed Marcus's strong hand.

It was done. She pushed the door open.

A shadow rose before her, a sword glinting in the light of the fire.

Sage's hand dropped to her pommel and then stopped. The red from the fire behind her cast flickering light over the woman holding the sword.

Sage inhaled.

Behind her, Marcus reached for his weapon.

But Sage couldn't move. She could barely breathe. She recognized the face before her. The armor. The hair.

"Raven," she gasped.

# Epilogue

**S**age's heart jumped and hammered in her chest as relief engulfed her. For a moment disbelief filled her. Raven could it be?

Raven tossed her sword aside, and the two women lurched forward to embrace each other tightly. Sage buried her face in Raven's shoulder. The familiar scent of Raven's rich leather armor overpowered her. She never wanted to let her go.

Raven pulled back to look at her with a wrinkled brow of concern.

"Are you well?" both asked at the same time.

They let out a relieved chuckle.

"What happened to your hair?" Raven asked, her gaze brushing over the short strands.

The crackling behind them exploded into a roar as a beam collapsed, sending burning embers into the night air. A warm blast of hot air surrounded them.

Marcus hooked an arm around Sage's waist and moved her away from the barn, casting a wary glance at Raven.

Sage clasped Raven's hand and tugged her with them, afraid if she let go, she would lose her again.

A tall, broad-shouldered man followed Raven. His brows were lowered in a frown as he contemplated them. The heat from the barn blew his black strands forward. He seemed unaffected as he bent to pick up Raven's sword. His dark tunic was as dark as the sky, and he had a sword strapped to his waist.

Raven's stare whisked over Marcus and rested on his familiar hold on Sage. Her brow furrowed in disapproval, and she released Sage's hand as the other man handed over her sword. Raven exchanged a grateful glance with him before sheathing her weapon.

They traipsed through the harvested field to the forest line where the horses were tethered. Sage ducked beneath a branch and stopped beside her horse. She glanced at Raven with happiness. She was so glad to see her.

Raven met her gaze with a smile on her lips. "Where's Willow?" she asked.

Sage's joy evaporated. "She's not with you?" Sage asked, glancing beyond Raven, expecting Willow to come bounding out from around a tree.

“No. She disappeared in the chateau at le Bezu. I thought she was right behind me, but she wasn’t,” Raven explained.

Worry ignited within Sage. Where was Willow? She and Raven exchanged concerned looks.

Raven took a deep breath. “We’ll find her.”

A large crash sounded from the barn, drawing Sage’s attention. Through the trees, she saw the fire encompass the structure, sizzling and snapping. Angry red flames reached for the sky. Thick gray smoke rolled into the sky from the burning barn.

It wouldn’t be long before the villagers, and even the soldiers, arrived.

“We should leave here,” Marcus suggested, staring at the barn.

Sage nodded. She gathered up Marcus’s hand and turned to Raven. “I want you to meet Marcus.” She looked at his grateful eyes and grinned. “This is my sister, Raven.”

Raven greeted him with a curt nod. “This is Sir Landyn,” she introduced, indicating the man with them.

Sage’s gaze moved over him. Dark, wavy hair hung to his strong shoulders. His square chin was raised, evaluating her.

“Are you in trouble?” Raven asked.

Sage swiveled her gaze to her. She shrugged and grinned. “Always. The king’s man, Nogaret, is looking for us.”

Raven’s mouth dropped and then closed into a thin line of displeasure. She shook her head.

“He’s looking for a book Sage decoded,” Marcus clarified with pride in his voice.

Warmth heated Sage’s heart as she stared at him. His lips were curled in a grin of respect as his gaze burned into her.

“A book?” Raven wondered. “The book we brought to Brother Nicolas?”

Sage nodded.

“Why is he looking for it? What’s inside?”

“Directions,” Sage answered. “To what, we aren’t sure.”



Later that night, after escaping the village and riding for half the night, Sage insisted they stop so she could treat Marcus’s wounds. Sheltered off the road, beneath tall trees that waved in a soft breeze, they rested. Sage knew Marcus couldn’t get far enough away from the village.

She tended Marcus near a small stream as Raven and Landyn sat

beneath one of the thin trees. Sage reached around Marcus, wrapping his ribs with a cloth. He was bruised and beaten, with black-and-blue marks already appearing on his torso, but he would recover. "You're quiet."

Marcus's gaze focused on Raven and Landyn where they sat paces away, leaning into each other and speaking quietly. "I saw him at le Bezu," Marcus said softly.

Sage glanced over her shoulder at Landyn. He held Raven's hand, stroking it gently, lovingly, and speaking to her in whispered tones. It was strange to see Raven allowing a man to touch her so intimately.

Marcus bent close to Sage. "I don't trust him."

Sage inhaled and watched her sister. Raven bowed her head at something Landyn said to her, and a grin spread over her face. "But Raven does," Sage replied. "That's enough for me. It has to be enough for you, too."

Marcus's lips thinned in disapproval, but he finally nodded.

She ran a hand over one of the ugly, blue bruises on his ribs.

He captured her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her fingertips.

"They would have killed you," she said remorsefully.

"But you reached me first." He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers in gratitude. "It makes me happy to think how angry Guillaume must be that I escaped."

"Hopefully, he thinks you're dead, remember?"

"I almost was." His look softened as he stared into her eyes. "Sage, I owe you everything." He took a deep breath. "I want to marry you."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "You're just thankful that I saved your life." She waved his offer away.

He caught her hand, drawing her attention to him again. "No. I love you. I want to share my life with you. I want to be with you forever."

She gaped at him in disbelief as her heart beat wildly in her chest. "Me? Really?"

"If you'll have me." He bowed his head in remorse. "I don't have much to offer you."

She dipped her head to capture his gaze and stared tenderly into his eyes. "You have everything I want. There is no one else I would rather spend my life with. If you really want to marry me, I would be honored to be your wife."

He pulled her against him and claimed her lips in a deep kiss.

Wife, Sage thought with glee. Then, she wrapped her arms around his back and gave in to his passionate kiss. Desire flooded through her veins at his expertise touch, at his heated kiss.

When they separated, Sage wore a grin that would not fade.

Keeping her gaze locked on his, she reached to the ground and picked up his tunic to hand it to him.

As he pulled it over his head, she turned away and sat on the ground, sighing in contentment. It was almost too much to believe. If Willow and her father had been there, everything would have been perfect.

Slowly, her happiness faded. There was one thing left to do. She put her hand into her boot and removed the parchment pages. She spread them over the ground and began to decode the book.



Marcus leaned against a tree trunk and watched her for a long time. *Wife*. He could imagine no one more fitting or beautiful. He finally pushed himself from the tree and arched his back. He wanted Sage to finish decoding the book, but he was anxious to be moving farther away from the village.

He walked over to the four horses tied to the branches of the trees. His steed nickered as he approached, and he ran a hand along his nose. They had kept them saddled in case they needed to escape quickly. He walked around to the saddlebags.

"I saw you at le Bezu."

Marcus turned to find Landyn standing behind him with his arms crossed. Marcus's gaze moved over him. He still didn't trust him. "I was there," he admitted while reaching into the saddlebag to pull out a flask. "I trained there for a bit." He uncorked the flask and drank deeply.

"I saw you the same day Brother Nicolas was found dead."

Marcus lowered the flask from his lips and wiped a sleeve across his mouth. "Are you accusing me?"

"It is suspicious, don't you think?"

"Aren't you a Templar knight?" Marcus glanced at Raven and back to Landyn. Templar knights took vows of chastity.

Landyn straightened, his eyes narrowing. "I was."

"I've finished!" Sage cried.

Marcus placed the cork back on the flask and returned it to the saddlebag. He brushed by Landyn and hurried across the leaf-hewn ground to Sage's side. Raven stood over her, gazing down at the parchment pages as they shone in the moonlight.

He dropped to his knees at Sage's side, studying the words on the parchment. "Where do the directions lead?" he asked breathlessly.

Sage shook her head, rubbing a hand over her chin in confusion. "I

don't know."

"Doesn't it say in the book?" Marcus asked.

"No. It doesn't say anything except the directions. It doesn't even say where to start, and there is no specific end."

Marcus stared. "There's nowhere to start?"

"What kind of directions are those?" Raven asked.

"The kind that want to stay hidden," Landyn observed. "We were not meant to know what the directions were for."

Sage crossed her arms. "I don't believe that. There must be more. Something we're missing."

Perplexed silence spread over them. Crickets chirped in the distance. A twig snapped somewhere behind them.

Marcus glanced over his shoulder, scanning the dark shadows. He stood, taking hold of Sage's arm and drawing her to her feet. "We can think about this later. We should leave here."

"Maybe we should go back to le Bezu," Sage suggested, bending to gather up the parchment pages. "We have to find Willow."

"We should go to Sybil's farm. We were to meet there if we ever got separated," Raven suggested.

Sage agreed with a nod as she straightened the parchment and folded it, tucking it into her boot. She picked up the quill and ink and looked at her sister, cocking her head. "How did you get here? How did you find me?"

Raven exchanged a glance with Landyn. "It's a long story."

[Read Raven's Story](#)



# Free Sneak Preview of **Raven - Book 2** in Beauties with Blades™



## Prologue

England  
1292

**T**he sound of birds chirping heated me through the window of the one-room cottage. Even though sunlight streamed through the open shutters, the room was cold. The hearth against the far wall was out, the fire long since extinguished. The brightness of the sun and the happy song of the birds was strangely out of place.

Near the wall opposite the hearth, Raven Hawke, a thin girl of eight summers, stood over the straw mattress tucked into the corner of their home, staring at her mother. Her mother's eyes were closed, her brown hair framed her head, her hands were limp at her side. She had

been still for a long time now.

Earlier, Willow, the youngest sister, had called out to their mother, gently shaking her. But their mother did not move.

As the oldest, Raven was expected to be in charge. To know what to do. Yet, she couldn't move. She silently begged her mother to move, to breathe, but she had watched her mother for a long time, watched her chest for the rise and fall of her breathing. There was no movement. Her mother was motionless. Still, Raven was hopeful, hopeful her mother would sit up and smile and hug them.

Sage, the middle sister, sat in a rickety chair behind Raven near the small wooden table in the center of the room. Her long brown hair fell in a disarray about her shoulders. She flicked at a small indent in the wood of the table. Her legs were crossed beneath her.

Willow knelt on the floor beside her mother's mattress. Her long blonde hair fell forward over her mother's half open hand. She reached out and pulled a ragged blanket over her mother up to her chin. She placed a tiny hand on her mother's cheek before turning her head to lock a watery gaze with Raven. "She's cold."

"She's dead," Sage proclaimed.

Raven spun, casting a harsh glare at Sage and reprimanded, "Sage!"

Sage uncrossed her legs and pushed herself from her seat. Her brown hair was unkempt, hanging around her shoulders like an old cloak. Her eyes were aged and haunted past her six summers. "It's true! Mother's gone," she insisted.

Willow began to sob quietly, her small body shaking.

Raven glanced at her youngest sister before taking a step toward Sage with her fists clenched. Sage had always been like that. Stating facts. This wasn't the time. They had to figure out what to do. "Look what you've done now!" She flicked a hand at Willow.

"She should know the truth," Sage said with a frown.

"Not like that. You don't even care that mother is gone!" Raven accused.

Sage stuck her tongue out at Raven.

Raven wanted to pull her hair and hit her arm, but she felt a tugging at her skirt and looked down.

Willow stared up at her with large wet blue eyes. "What will we do without Mother?"

Raven looked at Sage, hoping she would have the answer.

Sage stared at her with expectant eyes.

Raven was supposed to have all the answers. She was supposed to know what to do. She cast a look at their mother, at her gray skin, at her peaceful sleeping face. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and a frown began to form on her brow. What were they supposed to do now? How could Mother do this? How could she leave them alone?

What were they going to do?

This time, Raven didn't have any answers.

Suddenly, the door flew open sending a gust of air into the room.

Willow leapt to her feet and ran to Raven, hiding behind her. Sage took a step back from the door, moving to her sister's side.

Raven lifted her chin to glare at the strange man standing in the doorway.

Shadowed by sunlight shining behind him, the tall man's severe gaze moved from sister to sister. His dark shoulder-length hair blew forward, pushed by a rush of wind curling into the room. His jaw was square and firm, his eyes were hard. Leather armor fit snugly over his torso and a sword was strapped to his waist. He had to duck to enter the cottage.

Raven instinctively placed a protective arm around Willow, drawing the man's gaze. Her heart beat madly out of fear.

His stare shifted to their mother. His wrinkled brow softened, and the sternness in his face diminished. He took three steps across the room, past the girls until he was at her side.

Raven gathered Willow to her and moved out of his way.

He knelt at the woman's side and stared for a long moment. He gently eased a strand of brown hair from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear. He touched her hand, squeezing it, before lifting the blanket over her face.

He stood, inhaled deeply and turned to them.

Raven hugged Willow against her. She didn't know this man. She didn't know what he wanted or what he would do.

"Gather your belongings," the man commanded in a deep voice. "Bring only what you can carry."

Startled, Raven could only stare at him. She clutched Willow tightly. It wasn't the man's appearance that sent shivers racing down her spine. It was his voice. Serious, forceful.

It was familiar.

"Who are you?" Willow asked in a timid voice.

He approached, his boots thundering on the wooden floor.

Raven retreated a step, pulling Willow behind her.

Sage peered around Raven's shoulder.

Raven lifted her chin higher. She would not let him hurt her sisters.

The man stopped before her, and she met his stare.

Dark eyes swept her, assessing. "I'm your father."

[Read Raven: Book 2 in Beauties with Blades](#)

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